THE MANSION OF MYSTERY

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The Mansion of Mystery

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Being a Certain Case of Importance, Taken from the Note-book of Adam Adams, Investigator and Detective

BY

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The Mansion of Mystery

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THE MANSION OF MYSTERY

CHAPTER I

THE STORY OF A DOUBLE TRAGEDY

THE young man was evidently in a tremendous hurry, and as soon as the ferryboat bumped into the slip he was at the gate and was the first one ashore. He beckoned to one of the alert taxicabmen, and without waiting to have the vehicle brought to him, ran to it and leaped inside.

"Do you know where the Vanderslip Building is?" he questioned abruptly.

"Yes, sir."

"Then take me there with all possible speed."

"Yes, sir."

The door slammed, the taxi driver mounted to his seat, and off the taxi started at the best rate of speed the driver could attain. The young man sank down among the cushions and buried his chin in his hands.

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His face, normally a handsome one, was now wrinkled with care, his hair was disheveled, and he looked as if he had lost much sleep. At times his mouth twitched nervously and he clenched his fists in a passion which availed him nothing.

"To think that she is guilty!" he muttered. "It is horrible! Horrible!" And then his whole frame shook as if with the ague. Twice he started up, to see if he had not yet arrived at his destination. But the drive was a long one, and to him, in his keen anxiety, it appeared an age.

"If he is away—out of town—in Europe, or on some case which he cannot leave, what am I to do?" he murmured. "I've pinned my whole faith on him."

Presently there was a jar, and the taxicab came to a halt in front of a large office building. The young man gave one look, and, before the driver could get down, had the door open and was on the pavement. "Here you are," he said and thrust a dollar bill into the fellow's hand. Then he crossed the broad pavement and was lost to sight in the corridor beyond.

"In a hurry and no mistake, and looks a heap worried, too," was the chauffeur's comment. "Well, I'm a quarter ahead on that fare."

For a moment the young man studied the directory on the corridor wall. Then he entered an elevator and alighted at the eighth floor. He walked down a side hall until he came to a door upon the glass of which was inscribed the name

Adam Adams

"This must be the place," he murmured, and opening the door he entered the office, to find himself in a plain but neatly furnished apartment, containing several chairs, and a flat-top desk, at which a young lady was writing.

"Is Mr. Adams in?" he asked, as the young lady arose to meet him.

"What name, please?" was the counter question, and the young lady gave the visitor a keen glance.

"Raymond Case." The young man brought forth his card. "Tell Mr. Adams I am the son of the late Wilbur Case, and wish to see him on important business."

The young lady disappeared through a door leading to an inner apartment. From this she entered another apartment, much larger, and overlooking the little city park far below. The room was filled with books and pictures, and some wall brackets contained several bits of finely-carved statuary. There was one large roller-top desk and three comfortable leather chairs.

At the desk sat a man of uncertain age, with a strong face, a somewhat bald head, and eyes that were neither light nor dark. The man was of ordinary height, but muscular to a surprising degree. His face showed a high order of intelligence and his mouth a determination not easily thrust aside.

"A gentleman to see you," said the young lady. She placed the card before him. "He told me to tell you that he is the son of the late Wilbur Case, and wishes to see you on important business."

The man at the desk drew a long breath and looked up from a slip of paper which he had been studying through a microscope. "Raymond Case, eh? All right, Letty, show him in."

In another moment the visitor was in the private office. Adam Adams arose and gave him a warm handshake.

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Case," he said cordially. "I knew your late father quite well—a fine man—a very fine man, indeed. Have a chair and make yourself at home." He noted that his visitor was much agitated and flushed. "Sit down by the window; there is a nice breeze there from across the park."

"Mr. Adams, I would like to see you in private," returned the young man, as he took a seat and mopped his forehead with his handkerchief.

"Very well," and the office door was carefully closed. Then came a brief pause, during which Raymond Case cleared his throat several times.

"Mr. Adams, you do not know much about me, but I know a great deal about you," he commenced. "Three or four years ago you recovered some stolen mining shares for my father, and last year you cleared up the Sandford mystery, after the police and the other detectives had failed completely."

Adam Adams bowed. He rarely spoke unless there was occasion for it.

"May I ask if you are now at liberty?" pursued the young man.

"At liberty? Bless you, no! I have half a dozen cases on hand. Two here in the city—one over in New Jersey—one in Yonkers, and——"

"But you will undertake a case for me, if I pay you well for it, won't you?" interrupted the young man eagerly. "Don't say no—please don't!" And there was a ring of agony in his speech. "I am depending upon you!"

The detective paused before replying, and looked the young man over with care. The clean-cut features showed not a sign of dissipation, and the expression was honesty itself. Certainly the young man had not gotten into trouble on his own account.

"I should want to know something about the case before I promised to do anything."

"Certainly—of course——" The young man cleared his throat again.

"You can tell me what the trouble is and if I decline to take the case I will give you my promise not to say a word to any outsider of what has passed between us."

"Oh, I know I can trust you, Mr. Adams, otherwise I should not have called here. My father said you were the squarest man he had ever dealt with. I came to see you about the Langmore affair."

"You mean the murder of Mr. and Mrs. Barry Langmore at Beechwood Hill?"

"Yes."

Adam Adams was surprised, although he did not show it. What had this rich young man, who lived in Orange, New Jersey, and did business in Wall Street, to do with that double tragedy which had so shocked the community?

"I presume you know some of the particulars of the sad affair," resumed Raymond Case. "The newspapers have been full of it."

"I know that the pair were found murdered.

I have not looked into details, being so busy with other matters."

"It was an outrageous deed, Mr. Adams!" cried the young man, jumping up and beginning to pace the floor. "One of the foulest of which I have ever heard."

"A murder is always foul, no matter under what circumstances it is committed. What do you wish me to do?"

"Find the murderer."

"That may not be easy. Are not other detectives already working on the case?"

"Yes, but they are only local men and not worth their salt."

"They may be doing all that can be done. It is a mistake to presume that every mystery of this sort can be solved. Here in New York men go to their death every year and nobody ever finds out how, or by what hand."

"But the local men simply jump at conclusions. They are a set of blind fools, and——" The young man stopped short.

Adam Adams smiled faintly. He knew something of the bungling work done by detectives of small caliber. Had he not himself once saved a poor Jew from hanging after several country detectives had apparently proved the fellow guilty? And had not those same sleuths of the law been angry at him ever since?

"Excuse me, Mr. Case, but how is it that you take an interest in this affair?" he asked. "Are you related to the Langmores in any way?"

"I am not." The young man began to blush. "Is it necessary that I tell you why?" he stammered.

"It is not necessary for you to tell me anything," responded the detective dryly.

"I didn't mean to say——"

"Let me give you a word of advice. Never try to get a detective to do anything for you unless you are willing to tell him all you know and all you suspect. It is generally hard enough to solve an enigma without having other mysteries attached to it."

The young man lowered his face and looked confused for a moment.

"Then I will tell you everything," he said. "You may take notes if you wish."

"It is not necessary, since I have a good memory."

"The Langmores lived just on the outskirts of the town, on the road leading to Sidham, which is several miles distance."

"I have a general idea of the location."

"The house is a fine, old-fashioned stone mansion, setting well back from the road, and surrounded by a well-kept lawn and numerous trees and bushes. At the rear of the garden is a small stream, which flows into the river a mile and a half below."

"Is the place surrounded by a fence?"

"On two sides only. In the front there is a hedge and in the rear the little stream forms the boundary of the property."

"I understand."

"At the time of the tragedy there were four persons in the house, so far as known—Mr. and Mrs. Langmore, Mr. Langmore's daughter, Margaret, and a servant, Mary Billings."

"Wait a moment. You said Mr. Langmore's daughter. Was she not Mrs. Langmore's daughter also?"

"No. You see Mr. Langmore was a widower when he married the present Mrs. Langmore, who was a widow. There are two sets of children."

"I understand. When did the tragedy occur?"

"At some time between eleven and twelve in the morning. During that time Margaret Langmore was in her room writing several letters, and was practicing on the piano in the parlor. The house is a large one, with sixteen rooms and several hallways and stairs."

"Where was the servant?"

"In the kitchen and out to the barn. There are two other girls, but one is in the hospital sick and the other was to town on an errand."

"Where were Mr. and Mrs. Langmore?"

"The daughter thought her stepmother had gone out to visit a neighbor, as she had said something about doing so earlier in the morning. Mr. Langmore had gone to the bank in town at nine o'clock and Margaret saw him come home about half-past ten or eleven."

"What was she doing at the time?"

"Practicing on the piano. She heard her father go directly to his library, which is situated across the hallway from the parlor. She heard the door shut, and then went on with her practicing."

"Did she hear anything in the library?"

"She thinks she heard something, but is not sure. She was practicing a very difficult piece by Wagner——"

"And it was loud enough to drown out every other sound."

"That's it. When the clock struck twelve she stopped practicing to learn if lunch was ready. She also wanted to speak to her father, and so crossed the hallway and opened the library door." The young man's voice began to tremble a little.

"She found her father stretched lifeless in an armchair."

"How had he been killed?"

"That is a part of the mystery. He was either choked or smothered to death, or else he was poisoned. The doctors don't seem to be able to get at the bottom of it."

For the first time since Raymond Case had begun his recital Adam Adams began to show an interest.

"If the man was strangled his throat should show the marks," he observed.

"There are no marks, and the doctors have found no trace of poison."

"Humph!" The detective rubbed his chin reflectively. "What next?"

"Margaret Langmore was so horrified she ran from the room screaming wildly. Her shrieks brought the servant to the spot, and a minute later two of the neighbors, Mrs. Bardon and her son Alfred, came over from next door."

"Where was Mrs. Langmore at this time?"

"Nobody knew. Alfred Bardon is a physician, and, thinking there might still be a spark of life in Mr. Langmore, did all he possibly could to resuscitate the gentleman. The servant girl ran upstairs to find some drugs for him and in the upper hallway stumbled over the dead body of Mrs. Langmore."

"And how had she died?"

"In the same manner as her husband. This news of a double tragedy was too much for Margaret, and she fainted. The others notified more of the neighbors and the police, and of course, the news spread like wildfire. I was stopping at the Beechwood Hotel at the time and as soon as I heard of the tragedy, I jumped into an automobile that was handy and rode over."

"Then you arrived at the house about as soon as the police?"

"A little before."

"What did you see?"

"Just what I have told you. The doctor had been trying to bring Mr. Langmore around but had suddenly been taken sick and could do nothing."

"Humph, sick, eh? Did he say what made him sick?"

"He did not know. He thought it might be from leaning over the dead man, or from working in that position. I think the sudden sickness frightened him a little."

"When the police arrived what did they find of importance?"

"Nothing."

"Had anything been stolen?"

"Nothing, so far as they could learn."

"Of course, you must have known these folks pretty well to take such an interest."

"I knew Mr. Langmore very well and I was acquainted with his wife."

Adam Adams knit his brow for a moment and tapped lightly on his desk with his forefinger.

"Have the police any idea as to how the murderer got into the house and got out again?" he asked.

At this question Raymond Case's face flushed.

"They do not think the murderer left the house," he answered in a low tone.

CHAPTER II

LOVE UNDER A SHADOW

Raymond Case dropped back into his chair and buried his face in his hands. Adam Adams eyed him curiously and with something of a fatherly glance.

"It is plain to see what his trouble is," thought the detective. "He is in love."

He was right, Raymond Case was furiously, desperately, hopelessly in love. He had met Margaret Langmore at Bar Harbor but a few short weeks before, and it had been a case of love at first sight upon both sides. A few automobile rides and a few dances, and he had proposed and been accepted, and he had counted himself the happiest man in all this wide world. And now———

"Then they suspect the servant girl?" queried Adam Adams, knowing they did nothing of the sort.

"No!" came sharply. "They suspect Margaret—Miss Langmore."

"Ah!"

"Yes. It is—is preposterous—absurd, but they insist. And that is what has brought me to you. I want to prove her innocence to the world. Do that, and you can name your own price, Mr. Adams."

"You have a high regard for the young lady—you are close friends?"

"More. I may as well tell you, though so far Margaret and I have kept the matter more or less a secret. I love her and we are engaged to be married."

"Did Mr. Langmore know of his daughter's engagement?"

"He did, and he approved of it."

"And what of Mrs. Langmore, didn't she approve?"

"She did not know of it. Margaret did not tell her."

"Why not?"

"Because—well, the young lady and her stepmother did not get along very well together. Margaret wanted to be friendly, but Mrs. Langmore was very dictatorial, and besides she loved her own children better than Mr. Langmore's."

"Let me ask, was the daughter on good terms with her father?"

"Yes, excepting on one point. He wished her to obey her stepmother and that she was not always willing to do. This brought on a run of petty quarrels which fairly made Margaret sick."

"And this is the reason why the police think Miss Langmore the guilty person?"

"It is. Their theory is that she first quarrelled with her stepmother and murdered her, and then struck down her father to cover her guilt, he having discovered what she was doing."

"How old is Miss Langmore?"

"She has just passed her twenty-third birthday."

"Humph! Rather young to commit such a cold-blooded crime as this."

"She never did do it—I'll wager my life on it! Oh, it's absurd—insulting! But what are you going to do with a lot of pig-headed country police——"

"How did they come to suspect her? Was there nothing else?"

"Yes, there was. Mrs. Bardon, the woman who lives next door, is a great gossip and one who is continually poking her nose into other folks' business. She told the police that she was out in the garden cutting a bouquet early in the morning, and she heard a violent quarrel going on at the breakfast table between Mrs. Langmore and Margaret, and that Mr. Langmore took his wife's part. Margaret wished to give a small house party and Mrs. Langmore would not listen to it."

"Did Mrs. Bardon hear all that was said?"

"No, only enough to make her run to the police with the tale."

"Is any other house near by?"

"The Harrison mansion, but it is locked up, as the family is in Europe."

"Did you hear if Mrs. Bardon and her son were home all morning?"

"They were, excepting when the doctor went out to make some calls, between nine and eleven."

"Did they see any suspicious characters around the Langmore mansion?"

"Not a soul."

"Did Mary Billings, the servant, see anybody?"

"She thinks she saw somebody near the river, but she is not sure; in fact, she is so scared that she is all mixed up. She has told the police a thousand times that she had nothing to do with the crime."

"Did Miss Langmore see anybody?"

"She saw a Doctor Bird pass in his buggy and a farmer named Carboy go by on foot."

"When was this?"

"While she was at the piano. She doesn't know the exact time."

There was a pause and the detective gave a faraway look out of the window and down the bustling thoroughfare.

"So far as you are aware, Mr. Case, did Mr. Langmore have any personal enemies?"

"I never heard of any."

"He was rich?"

"Yes."

"What was his business?"

"He was a dealer in patents and a promoter. Some thought he was rather eccentric, but I never found him so. He used to have an office here in New York but gave that up a year ago."

"Well, what is your idea of this crime?"

"I haven't any. But I know Margaret Langmore is not guilty."

"Evidently if they suspect her they have concluded that Mrs. Langmore was killed first."

"That is their idea, but it looks to me as if both were killed at about the same time, although I know that couldn't very well be."

"No, not if one was upstairs and the other down. Do you think it possible that one killed the other and then committed suicide?"

At this Raymond Case started back.

"I had not thought of that!" he cried. "If it is true then that clears Margaret." Evidently he was thinking only of the girl he loved—everything else concerning the mystery was of secondary consideration.

"Such a thing is possible, although not probable, unless the two had a bitter quarrel between themselves. Every crime must have a motive. People do not commit murder unless there is a reason for it or unless they are insane. Motives may be divided into three classes—jealousy, revenge, or gain. In this instance I think we can throw out jealousy——"

"Mrs. Langmore was jealous of Margaret."

"And wasn't the young lady jealous of her stepmother in a way?"

"But she is not guilty—I'll stake my life on her innocence."

"Then let us come down to revenge or gain. You say nothing was stolen. Was there a safe in the house?"

"Yes, and it is closed, and will remain so until the experts open it."

"Nobody knew the combination but Mr. Langmore?"

"That's it. Margaret did know, but her stepmother had her father change the combination and keep it to himself."

"Had he much money in the house?"

"I think not. Margaret says her father was in the habit of depositing cash in the bank as soon as he received it."

"What sort of promoting did he do?"

"He organized companies to manufacture his patents. He also speculated in real estate and in mortgages. He owned two buildings in this city and several in the country."

"Who are the other members of the family?"

"Margaret's married sister, Mrs. Andrew Wetherby, of Sanhope, and Mrs. Langmore's two sons, Tom and Dick Ostrello."

"Where are these people located?"

"Mrs. Wetherby is traveling with her husband in South America. The Ostrello brothers are commercial travelers and somewhere on the road."

"Then the Ostrellos are not rich?"

"No, they are poor, and Mrs. Ostrello was poor, too, before she married Mr. Langmore."

There was another pause.

"Can you tell me anything else?" asked Adam Adams.

"Nothing of much importance. It's a deep mystery, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's very simplicity makes it deep." The detective drew a long breath. "I was thinking of taking a vacation. My doctor says I need it."

"Oh!" There was a world of disappointment in the word. "Don't say that! You must take hold of this. I planned it all out as I came to town. I know you can clear Margaret if you will only try. Think of her position—the disgrace—my position——Oh, you can't refuse me, Mr. Adams!" The young man came closer and caught the detective by the shoulder. "If it's money, set your price."

"If I take hold, I'll charge you only what is fair, Mr. Case. But I never take a case unless——"

"Any request you have to make is already granted."

"Unless I can first interview the person who stands accused of the crime."

"You can see Miss Langmore at any time. I told her that I was coming to town to interview you, and that I would bring you back with me, if you would come. I told her what a wonderful man you were and what you had done for others. I think it cheered her a little, although she was terribly cast down."

"You must not promise too much on my account, young man. I am no wizard, and I cannot perform the impossible, much as I might wish to do so."

"But you will come?"

"Yes, I will come."

"At once?" cried Raymond Case impatiently.

"At once."

CHAPTER III

MARGARET LANGMORE

As Raymond Case had said, the Langmore mansion was a large one, setting in the midst of an extensive lawn, sprinkled here and there with maples and oaks and fine flowering bushes. The hedge in front was well kept and the side fences were also in good repair. In the rear was a stable and also an automobile shed, for the late master of this estate had been fond of a dash in his runabout when time permitted. Down by the brook, back of the stable, was a tiny wharf, where a boat was tied up, a craft which Margaret Langmore had occasionally taken down to the river for a row.

The mansion now looked dark and lonesome, although many folks passed on the highway and whispered to each other that there was the spot where the gruesome tragedy had been committed. "And to think that the man's own daughter did it," they would generally add. "Beats all how bloodthirsty some folks can get. He must have cut her short on money or something and she was too high-strung to stand it."

"No, it ain't that," another would answer. "She's been flirting around with a certain young man, a Wall Street gambler, and her mother wouldn't have it and told her so. That's the real trouble, my way of thinking."

Inside of the house all was as quiet as a tomb save for the ticking of the long clock in the lower hall. Below, a single policeman was on guard, in company with a woman, who had been sent in to help: Upstairs another woman was stationed, to see that Margaret Langmore might not take it upon herself to leave for parts unknown.

Margaret sat in her own room, in the wing on the second floor, a dainty apartment, trimmed in blue and containing all her girlish treasures. On the walls were numerous photographs of her old schoolmates and the flag of the seminary she had attended. And on the mantel rested the picture of Raymond Case, the high polish of the surface marred in one spot where a tear had fallen upon it.

The girl was tall and slender, with a wealth of light-brown hair and eyes of deepest blue. It was more than a pretty face, for it had a certain sadness that was touching.

For several minutes the girl had not moved. Now, as the door opened and the woman who was on guard upstairs came in, she gave a long sigh.

"Can I do anything?" asked the woman, in a voice that was not unkindly.

"Nothing, thank you, Mrs. Morse."

"Would you like a cup of tea, or a bit of toast? Mrs. Jessup can make it easy enough—she has nothing at all to do."

"I do not care to touch a thing."

The answer came in a dreary monotone. The girl's trials were beginning to tell upon her. At first she had tried to bear up bravely, and the words Raymond had spoken had comforted her, but now he was gone and the whole world looked dark once more.

"Has anybody called?" she asked at length.

"Nobody to see you."

"Nobody?" Margaret began to pace the floor. "When did the coroner say the examination was to be continued?" she went on.

"To-morrow morning at eleven o'clock."

"And who is to be put on the stand?"

At this question the woman in charge began to fidget. "Excuse me, miss, but I was ordered not to answer questions. I'm sorry, and I wish you wouldn't worry so much. If I can do anything else——"

"You can do nothing."

At that moment came the sounds of carriage wheels and a cab from the depot drew up to the door. Margaret looked through the slats of a blind and saw that the arrivals were Raymond Case and a stranger, a man wearing a rather ordinary suit of clothing and a rough slouch hat.

"Thank Heaven, Raymond has brought somebody!" murmured the girl.

There was a short consultation at the front door and she heard the young man say: "He has a perfect right here and I demand admittance for us both." Then another murmur followed and the pair came upstairs. They knocked on the door of Margaret's room and were admitted, and Mrs. Morse was told that she might go.

"This gentleman has come to give Miss Langmore some advice," said Raymond Case. "If we want you we will call."

"But I have orders——"

"Miss Langmore will remain in this room, so you have nothing to fear. She has a legal right to receive advice."

"Oh, if the gentleman is a lawyer I have nothing to say," was the retort, and Mrs. Morse swept from the room.

The instant she was gone, the young man closed the door and then rushed up to Margaret Langmore and kissed her.

"I have succeeded!" he cried. "I told you I would. This is Mr. Adam Adams. Mr. Adams, this is Miss Margaret Langmore. Now, I guess we are going to show these country bumpkins a thing or two!" he added earnestly.

The detective advanced and shook hands. Margaret Langmore was a trifle disappointed in his appearance and her face clouded for an instant. Raymond was quick to notice it.

"You mustn't judge a man by his appearance. Mr. Adams makes himself look that way on purpose. He's the smartest, swiftest——"

"That will do," interrupted the detective with a brief smile.

"Will you help me?" The girl eyed the detective squarely. "I—I need help so much."

"I must hear your story first."

"Oh, I thought Raymond would tell you everything."

"He has told me all he knows. But I want to hear the story from your own lips. Something may have slipped him, you know."

"I will tell you everything. Please sit down."

Margaret Langmore began her narrative. It was fully an hour before she finished. Occasionally the detective asked a question, but for the most part he sat back with his eyes closed, as if thinking of something else.

"Now, Miss Langmore," he exclaimed, as he straightened up at the conclusion of her recital, "whom do you suspect of this crime?"

"I suspect no one, sir."

"Have you any idea why this awful deed was committed?" The detective had been on the point of saying "murder" but had checked himself.

"Not the least in the world."

"Some of the windows were, of course, open. What of the doors?"

"The front door and that to the side piazza were locked. The back door was open."

"Then a person might have sneaked in by the back way?"

"I presume so."

"Your father was quite dead when you found him?" asked the detective quickly.

"I—I—thought so." The girl began to choke up and sob. "It—it was such a shock—I—I——" She could not go on.

Adam Adams watched her keenly and noted how she trembled from head to foot.

"Do not take it so hard, Margaret," put in Raymond Case, placing his hand upon her shoulder. "It will all come out right in the end—I am sure of it."

"But it will not bring back my father!" sobbed the girl. "And he was so dear to me! And to think that we should quarrel at all——"

"The quarrel took place at the breakfast table, so you said," came from Adam Adams. "And you rushed out to get away from what your stepmother was saying to you?"

"Yes. I could not bear it any longer."

"Your father took Mrs. Langmore's part?"

"He did, but at the same time he told her not to be so hard on me—that I had been without a mother to guide me so many years, and all that."

"Do you think they quarreled between themselves after you left, or after your father came back from the bank?"

"I cannot say as to that."

"Mr. Adams has an idea that possibly one or the other of them was responsible," put in Raymond. "He thinks one might have killed the other and then committed suicide."

"I do not think so. I said it was possible," corrected the detective. "In taking up an affair of this sort one must look at it from all sides."

"I do not believe my father either killed her or committed suicide," answered Margaret Langmore firmly.

"Do you think Mrs. Langmore would act in such a fashion?"

The girl pondered for a moment.

"Honestly I do not. She may have killed my father, but if so she would have run away."

"The safe was closed at the time of the tragedy?"

"Yes."

"And absolutely nothing was stolen?"

"Nothing, so far as we have been able to ascertain."

"Was anything out of order, as if the assassin had been scared off while hunting around for something to steal?"

"I did not see anything. But I was so upset I noticed scarcely anything."

"That was natural, of course. The safe has not yet been opened?"

"No, we are waiting for a man to come from the safe makers."

"Now, one thing more. After you came back to the house before practicing what did you do?"

"I wrote some letters to girl friends, telling them I could not give a house party."

"And before that?"

"I—I, must I tell? I threw myself on the bed yonder for a good cry. It was silly, I know—but—but——"

"Did you hear anything unusual while you were here? Think carefully."

"I have tried to think it out several times. Sometimes I think I heard some sort of a shriek, but I am not at all certain. Then, again, I think I heard the fall of something heavy on the floor. But it may be all fancy."

"And that is all you can tell me?"

"Yes." Margaret Langmore gave a long sigh. "Oh, Mr. Adams, can you not do something for me? It is horrible to be suspected in this fashion. I cannot make a move without being watched!"

"It is certainly a cruel situation." The detective paused. "I am sure of one thing, Miss Langmore."

"And that is——"

"That you are innocent. Those who think you are guilty are fools, as Mr. Case says."

"Yet more than half the folks around here think that way."

"Let them. We'll set to work to prove their mistake."

"Good!" almost shouted Raymond Case, and his face broke out into a look of relief. "Then you will take the case, Mr. Adams?"

"I will."

"I know you will succeed."

"If you do succeed, I shall be grateful to you all my life," came from Margaret Langmore warmly.

CHAPTER IV

DETECTIVE AND DOCTOR

As ALREADY intimated, Adam Adams, in his career as an investigator and detective, had solved many difficult criminal problems, yet this somewhat remarkable individual realized that the mystery before him was as difficult of solution as any he had yet encountered.

The most tantalizing thing about the whole affair was its simplicity. Two people had been murdered in their own home in broad daylight. No one had been seen around the place, and even the manner in which the foul deed had been committed was a secret.

A score of possibilities presented themselves to his mind when he left Margaret Langmore and Raymond Case to begin the task he had set before himself—to clear the fair name of the beautiful girl who had placed her faith in him and his ability.

"I'll take a look around the house first," he reasoned. "Then I'll find out a little more about these dead folks and their connections."

Thinking that he must be some noted lawyer from New York, Mrs. Morse was very gracious to him, and readily consented to show him around.

"Here is the spot where Mrs. Langmore's body was found," said the woman, leading the way to a bend in the upper hallway. "The servant girl tripped over it in her hurry, and went sprawling. She was about scared out of her wits."

"Naturally enough. Do you know how the body was lying?"

"At full length, they say, face downward, and with the fists clenched."

"Was that window open?"

"Yes, but not the blinds."

"Where does that door lead to?"

"Mrs. Langmore's dressing room. The door was open when they found her—as if she had come out and was trying to get downstairs."

"Humph!" The detective pushed the blinds of the window open and began to examine the carpet on the floor.

"We've looked around, but we couldn't see a thing," pursued the woman.

"We? Who?"

"The coroner and the police officers."

"Oh! You say the body was lying right here?"

"Yes—the head there, and the feet there. I suppose you are going to try to clear Miss Langmore, aren't you?" went on Mrs. Morse curiously.

"I am—if she is innocent."

"You'll have a task doing it. Everybody around here thinks her guilty."

To this Adam Adams did not reply. He was down on his hands and knees, close to where the head of the murdered woman had rested. He placed his nose to the carpet and drew in a long breath. His olfactory nerves were sensitive, and detected a certain pungent, stinging odor, of a sort not easily forgotten.

"You must be pretty short-sighted," was the woman's comment. The sight of the man on his hands and knees amused her.

"Well, I might have a better pair of eyes, I admit."

From his examination of the carpet, the detective turned to the window. Outside was the roof to the side piazza of the mansion. On the tin roof were some dried-up spots of mud. He looked them over carefully, and came to the conclusion that they were footprints, but how old was a question.

"When did it rain last around here?" he asked.

"We haven't had a real storm for ten days or two weeks. We have had several showers, though."

He took a glance into Mrs. Langmore's dressing room. Everything was in perfect order, even to the powder-box and the cologne bottles on the dresser.

"That is all I wish to see up here," he said, and passed below, where he encountered the policeman in charge. Like the woman, this officer had taken him to be a lawyer, and he readily consented to let the detective inspect the library.

"Mr. Langmore was found in that chair," said he. "He looked as if he had suffered great pain before he died. I think he was strangled, although he didn't show the marks of it."

The library was a richly-furnished apartment. Along two walls were rows of costly volumes, many relating to modern inventions. On the walls hung some rare steel engravings, including one of Fulton and his first steamboat. There was a large library table, with a student's lamp, a mahogany roller-top desk, half a dozen comfortable chairs, and a small, but well-built safe, which, as said before, was closed and locked.

"The coroner locked and sealed the desk, and put all the loose papers in it," said the policeman.

There were two windows to the library, and one was close to the side porch, the roof of which the detective had examined from above. A person dropping from above could easily have entered the library by the window, thus saving himself the trouble of walking through the halls and down the stairs. Adam Adams looked outside, and saw on the ground a number of footprints, some running to a gravel path but a few feet away.

"Where are the bodies?" he asked, as he continued his examination of the room.

"At Camboin's morgue. The doctors have been looking for poison, but they can't find any."

The detective got down in front of the safe and examined it critically. Had it been opened after the murder and then closed again? That was an important question, but he was unable to answer it.

More by instinct than anything else, he got down and peered under the safe. A crumpled-up bit of paper caught his eye, and he picked it up and slipped it into his pocket without the policeman being the wiser.

"Has anybody else been here?" he asked. "I mean any outsiders."

"A good many folks from the village."

"Anybody else?"

"Yes, a detective from Brooklyn. He thought there might be a job for him, but there wasn't, so he went away," and the policeman smiled grimly.

"What was his name?"

"I think he said it was Peterson."

"Is that the Bardon house yonder?" And Adam Adams pointed through the window and across the side lawn.

"Yes. Doctor Bardon was the first to come over—he and his mother."

"So I heard. I think I'll step over and speak to them a moment."

"So you are working for Miss Langmore?"

"Yes, in a way."

"You'll have an uphill job clearing her. The coroner thinks he has a clear case against her."

"Do you know what evidence he possesses?"

"Not exactly. He isn't telling all he knows," returned the officer of the law. "There is the doctor now."

A buggy was coming down the road. It turned in at the next house, and a young man, carrying a small case, leaped out and disappeared into the dwelling.

In a few minutes more, Adam Adams made his way next door. An elderly servant admitted him and ushered him into the doctor's office, where the young physician sat marking down some calls in his notebook.

"This is Doctor Bardon, I believe. I just came over from the Langmore house. I am working on this mystery, and I understand you were the physician who tried to bring Mr. and Mrs. Langmore to life after they were found."

"I worked over Mr. Langmore, yes," was the young physician's answer. "I saw at once that it was impossible to do anything for his wife. She had a weak heart naturally, and was stone dead some time before I got there."

"You thought you saw a spark of life in Mr. Langmore?"

"Not exactly a spark, but I thought there might be hope. But I was mistaken, although I did everything I could."

"I have been told that working over the corpse made you sick."

At these words, the face of the young physician showed his annoyance. He drew himself up.

"Excuse me, but you are——" and he paused inquiringly.

"I am working on this case in the interests of Miss Langmore. My name is Adams."

"Oh!"

"What I would like to know is, What made you sick? Was it merely that a crime had been committed—something you were not accustomed to?"

"No, it was not, Mr. Adams. I am young, I know, but I have had a good hospital experience, and such things do not unnerve me. To be sure, Mr. Langmore was a good neighbor, and I thought much of him. But it was not that."

"Then what was it?"

"It was something about the corpse. As I worked I had to sneeze—something seemed to get into my nose and throat, and in a minute more I began to have cramps and grew deathly sick. It was the queerest sensation I ever experienced in my life. I haven't gotten over it yet."

"You had to go out to get some fresh air?"

"I did. If I had not, I think I should have suffered much more."

"And you found no trace of any poison, or anything of that sort?"

"Not the slightest. Another doctor was called in, and then I went back. The peculiar odor, or whatever it was, was gone, and I could find no further trace of it."

"You think it must have evaporated?"

"What else is there to think? The windows and blinds had been thrown wide open, and the sun was shining into the room."

This was all the young doctor could tell, and as he was in a hurry to get away on more business, the detective did not detain him further. He ascertained that Mrs. Bardon was also away, and then left the house.

In his pocket he still carried the bit of paper which he had picked up from under the safe. It had evidently been part of the wrapper around some small object, and bore the following, printed in blue ink:

nder & Co.,
ley Street,
ter, N. Y.
ark.

The paper might be valuable, and it might be worthless. It had evidently been around a small box or bottle. The address was evidently that of some firm doing business in some town in New York State. What the "ark" could stand for, he could not surmise.

As the detective left the Bardon house, he saw a middle-aged man entering the Langmore mansion. The man was well dressed and carried a dress-suit case.

"A visitor of some sort," he mused. "Perhaps a relative."

When he stepped up on the piazza Raymond Case came out to meet him. The young man wished to know if he had learned anything from the doctor.

"Not a great deal," answered Adam Adams. "Who was that man who just came in?"

"Thomas Ostrello, one of Mrs. Langmore's sons by her first husband."

"Is he a frequent visitor here?"

"I believe not. He is a commercial traveler, and on the road nearly all the time."

"Has he been here since the tragedy?"

"No. He was here the day before it occurred, but went away in the evening. I suppose his mother's death has shocked him a good deal."

"I believe you said the Ostrellos are not well off?"

"No; they are poor, so Margaret told me. Both of the sons are on the road, one for a paint house and this one for a drug house. By the way, I am going to town, to see the coroner. Do you want to come along?"

"No, I'll see him later. I want to take a walk around this place first. I may pick up a stray clue."

Left to himself, Adam Adams walked slowly around the mansion, noting the several approaches. He looked in at the stable and the automobile shed, and strolled down to the brook. He made no noise, for it was his practice to move about as silently as possible and without attracting attention.

Suddenly he halted and stepped out of sight behind some bushes not far away from the brook. He heard a splashing, which told him that somebody was near.

CHAPTER V

THE MAN AT THE BROOK

BESIDE the brook stood a shabbily-dressed man, apparently fifty-five or sixty years old. He wore an old rusty black coat and a soft hat with a hole in it. His face was tanned and partly covered with a beard.

The man was acting in a manner to excite anybody's curiosity. He carried a stick in his hand, and was poking around in the water with it. Every once in a while he looked around, to see if anybody was observing him.

Straining his eyes, Adam Adams saw a strip of white floating on the water. Once or twice it disappeared. Finally the end of the strip caught on an overhanging bush, and then the strange man withdrew his cane from the brook.

As he turned around the detective dodged out of sight. Apparently satisfied that he was not observed, the strange man leaned down at the bank of the brook, took something from his pocket and placed it down on the moist dirt. Then he took another object from his pocket and repeated the operation.

"Can they be shoes he has in his hands?" mused the detective. "And if they are, what is he doing with them?"

Hearing the slamming of a door at the mansion, Adam Adams drew still further back among the bushes. A minute later he saw the man make a long leap, clear the brook, and hurry away among the trees and brushwood on the other side.

"Humph! Perhaps this is worth investigating," mused the detective, and made his way to the spot the strange individual had occupied. On the bank of the brook he saw the marks of the man's broad shoes and also some prints made by smaller shoes. The latter prints were irregular, and at once arrested the detective's attention. He smiled grimly to himself.

"Clue number one!" he muttered.

Adam Adams looked around in the water. Soon he came upon the strip of white, and, pulling on it, brought to light a white silk shirtwaist, torn to ribbons in front and at one sleeve. He wrung the water and mud from the garment and examined it. Inside of the collar band were the initials, "M. A. L."

"Margaret A. Langmore," he murmured. "Those initials are hers. If the shirtwaist was hers, how did that fellow get possession of it? And did he place it here or find it here?"

Drying the garment as much as possible, he placed it in his pocket, and continued his search around the vicinity. He spent fully an hour in the locality, and then walked back the way he had come, and into the mansion. There he found Thomas Ostrello in conversation with the policeman.

"It is a terrible blow to me," the commercial traveler was saying. "And to think I was here just the day before it happened! If I had remained here over night, it might not have occurred at all!"

"Well, that's the way things happen," answered the policeman. "Once I was at one end of my beat when a thief broke into a store at the other end and stole sixteen dollars and two hams."

"And I suppose they blamed you for it."

"Sure they did. I was laid off for a week, without pay. If anything happens it is always the poor copper who is to blame."

"Well, the family are not blaming you for this."

"They can't—especially as they've got the person who did the deed."

At this Thomas Ostrello shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know about that."

"You don't?"

"No. I'd hate to believe any girl could do such a fearful thing as this." The commercial traveler paused. "I'm going to take a look around. I suppose it's all right."

"Certainly, Mr. Ostrello," answered the policeman, and then the commercial man stepped into the library, closing the door after him.

Adam Adams had passed into the dining room, just back of the library, but had heard what was said. Now, looking through the doorway, which had a sliding door and a heavy curtain, the latter partly drawn, he saw the man glance around hurriedly, moving from one object to another in the library. He looked under the table and the chairs, in the corners, and even into the various bookcases. Then he came and knelt down before the safe, and tried the knob of the combination half a dozen times.

"He is more than ordinarily interested," reasoned the detective. "But then it was his own mother who was murdered."

The commercial man continued his search until he had covered every object in the room several times. He even looked behind the pictures, and into the drawer of the table, something which had escaped the coroner's eye when sealing up the desk. Adam Adams saw him shake his head in despair. He took a turn up and down the apartment and clenched his hands nervously.

"Gone!" he muttered to himself. "What could have become of it?"

He drew from his pocket a notebook he carried, and studied several items carefully. A long sigh escaped from his lips as he restored the notebook to his pocket.

As the commercial traveler moved toward the dining room, the detective stepped into a side apartment, used in the winter as a conservatory. He saw Thomas Ostrello make an examination of several places, including a sideboard. Then the woman who had been placed in charge of the downstairs portion of the mansion entered.

"Won't you have a bite to eat, Mr. Ostrello?" she asked.

"Perhaps so, later on. I do not feel like eating now. Can I take a look at my mother's room?"

"Why, yes. I suppose you know where it is?"

"Certainly; I often visited her there when she was not feeling well."

He passed out without another word, and was soon mounting the heavily-carpeted stairs. Once in the room, he closed the door tightly. Coming up softly after him, Adam Adams tried the door and found it locked. More interested than ever, the detective, just avoiding Mrs. Morse, who was passing through the hallway, slipped into the adjoining room, and finding, as he had imagined, a door between the two, applied his eye to the keyhole.

This might mean nothing, and it might mean everything. He saw Mrs. Langmore's son moving around the dressing room precisely as he had moved around the library. He heard the bureau drawers opened and shut, and then heard the squeak of a small writing desk that stood in a corner, as the leaf was turned down. Then came a rattle of papers and a sudden subdued exclamation. The desk was closed again, and the man came out of the room, leaving the hall door partly open.

"Whatever he was looking for, he must have found it," reasoned the detective. "Now, what was it?"

He waited in the hallway and heard Thomas Ostrello enter the dining room. A minute later came the rattle of dishes. Then Mrs. Morse confronted him.

"Back again, I see," she said rather sharply.

"Yes; I wish to have another talk with Miss Langmore," he returned, and, brushing her aside, knocked on the girl's door, and was admitted. The woman pursed up her lips.

"How very important some of those city lawyers are," she muttered. "Think they know it all, I guess. Well, he'll have a job clearing her, if what Coroner Busby says is true."

"Oh, I did not know you were coming back!" exclaimed Margaret. "Has anything happened?"

"I want to know something about this, Miss Langmore," and he brought out the torn and wet shirtwaist. "Is it yours?"

"Oh, certainly; but where did it come from? And it is all torn, too! It was almost new when I had it on last!"

"When was that?"

The girl thought for a moment, and then turned pale.

"On the morning that—that——"

"That the tragedy occurred?"

"Yes. I don't know what made me put it on, but I did."

"And when did you take it off?"

"Why, let me see. Some time in the afternoon, I think. I—I fainted, and it got dirty, and so I put on another and threw this in the clothes closet."

"Are you certain you put it in the clothes closet?"

"Positive. Where did you find it?"

"Never mind that just now. Do you keep your shoes in that closet?"

"I do. But why——"

"Will you kindly see if all of your shoes are there?"

The girl ran over, opened the closet door, and began an immediate examination.

"One pair is missing—a pair I use a great deal, too," she said a minute later. "Oh, Mr. Adams, what does this mean?"

"I don't know—yet. While you are at it, you might let me know if anything else is missing."

Margaret began a close examination of everything in the closet, the detective watching her as keenly as he had before.

"She is either innocent, or else the greatest actress I've ever met," was his mental conclusion. "I think her innocent, but the best of us get tripped up at times. If she is innocent, that evidence was manufactured to prove her guilty. If only I had followed that man up! I might have learned something worth knowing."

"Nothing else seems to be missing," announced the girl, at length.

"Very well; then don't waste time by searching further. By the way, did you know Mr. Thomas Ostrello had arrived?"

"Yes; I told Raymond to telegraph for him. He used to call quite often to see his mother."

"What about the other son—Dick?"

"I do not know where he is."

"Didn't he come here?"

"He came once. But he is a dissipated young man, and I do not think my stepmother cared much for him."

"But she did think a good deal of the one who is now downstairs?"

"Yes, although they occasionally had their quarrels, just as we had ours. Tom would plead for his brother Dick, who seemed to be always wanting money. Once my father took a hand and said his wife shouldn't give Dick a cent more, as he only squandered it. That made Tom angry, and he had a quarrel with my father, and after that when Tom came he would ask to see only his mother, although he and I remained on fairly good terms."

"Tom was here the day before the tragedy?"

"Yes. I think he came to see his mother about some private business. They had a long talk in her room, and she seemed to be quite excited when he went away. I don't know what it was all about. But, Mr. Adams, are you not hungry, and won't you have a lunch?"

"Thanks, I'll take a bite."

The lunch was served in Margaret's apartment, and the detective did ample justice to it, for he never allowed business to interfere with his appetite. As he ate, the girl watched him curiously.

"Mr. Adams," she said presently, "do you know, you do not seem a bit like a detective to me—I mean like the detectives you read about—the men going about in wonderful disguises and the like, and doing marvelous things? And yet, I know you have a wonderful reputation—Raymond told me about it."

At that he smiled broadly. "Wonderful disguises, eh? Well, I use them when I think them necessary, and not otherwise. When I started out, years ago, I used a great many more than I do now. To me a mystery of this sort is a good deal like a cut-up picture that you give a child to put together. First, you want to make sure you have all the pieces, and then you want to sit down, put on your thinking-cap, and match the pieces together. To you this is an awful tragedy," his tone softened greatly, "to me it is another case, nothing more. Work such as I have done is bound to harden a fellow, in spite of all of his finer feelings. But I feel for you and you have my sympathy."

"And you will aid me? You said you would," she pleaded.

"I am going to do what I can—no man can do more."

CHAPTER VI

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS

FROM the Langmore mansion Adam Adams went to town, and at the morgue made a careful inspection of the pair who had been the victims of the tragedy. This critical examination brought nothing new to light, and he turned away from the place with something of disappointment.

"I'll take a look around that brook again, and see if that strange man is anywhere in sight," he told himself, and got back to the vicinity without delay.

Fortune favored him for once, for scarcely had he reached the back of the Langmore mansion when he saw the stranger leap the brook again and come up towards the house.

"Just in time," murmured the detective. "He shall not slip me again in a hurry."

The stranger was very much on his guard, and Adam Adams had all he could do to keep out of his sight. It was now growing dark, especially under the trees which surrounded the mansion.

At length the fellow gained a point almost under one of the library windows. He gazed around sharply, and then appeared to be searching for something on the ground. The detective saw him start to pick something up, but at that moment the side door of the mansion opened and the policeman came out.

"Hullo! What are you doing here?" demanded the officer.

"Oh, that's all right," was the low answer. "Don't mind me."

"But what are you doing here?"

"Just looking around, that's all."

"You haven't any right in this yard."

"I think I have."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Watkins—Jack Watkins," and then some words followed which Adam Adams did not catch.

"Oh, then I suppose that makes a difference," came from the policeman in a more humble tone. "Do you want to come in the house and see Miss Langmore?"

"No, I don't want to see the girl. But I'll come into the house," answered the strange man, and walked up the piazza steps and into the mansion, with the policeman by his side.

As soon as the fellow was ought of sight, Adam

Adams drew closer and looked under the bushes where the other had been searching.

At first he saw nothing, but then his keen eye detected a bit of paper, caught at the foot of some shrubbery.

"More documentary evidence, perhaps," he murmured, as he shoved the paper into his pocket. "I wonder if this connects with the piece I found under the safe?"

He approached the window, the blinds of which were closed, and peered through the slats. A light had been lit, and the policeman and the stranger had just entered the room.

"I don't think you'll find much to interest you," said the officer. "All of the others have hunted around, and they didn't find much."

The stranger walked around the apartment slowly, and then sank into an armchair.

"Sit down and have a smoke with me," he said, pulling out his cigar case. "You've got a long night before you."

"I am not going to stay up all night. The women folks and me are going to take turns. They should have sent another man here, but the chief couldn't spare him, two of the men being sick."

Cigars were lit, and the pair smoked away for several minutes, talking of the case in all of its details. Evidently the stranger agreed with the general public regarding Margaret Langmore's guilt.

"Of course she'll put on a good front," said he, blowing a ring of smoke into the air. "She's that sort—so I've heard. What does her stepbrother say about it?"

"Not much, now. At first he didn't think her guilty, but after he talked with me and the women folks, he changed his mind, I reckon. It's a blow to him, for he thought a good deal of the old lady."

"Mr. Sudley!" came a call from the hallway. "Mr. Sudley, where are you?"

It was one of the women who was calling, and, laying down his cigar, the policeman left the library to see what she wanted.

The door had scarcely closed on the officer when the demeanor of the other man changed. He arose, looked into the dining room, and listened at the hall doorway for a second. Then he recrossed the apartment and knelt before the safe. Adam Adams heard him mutter something to himself as he twirled around the knob of the combination. Twice he tried the door and failed to open it, but the third effort was successful. But before he could do more than glance into the strong box, there was a noise in the hallway. Instantly he shut the door again, dropped into his chair, and resumed his smoking.

"Women folks are a regular nuisance," was the policeman's comment, on coming back. "Want you to do this and then that—keep you on the go all the time. I'm tired of it."

"Take my advice, and don't marry," was the rejoinder, with a laugh.

"Too late—I've got a wife and five children already. But I've got to go to the barn. Will you come along?"

"Why—er—I suppose so." The stranger hesitated. "I'll have to be going pretty soon. Going to stay in this room all night?"

"No; I'm going to lock up and go upstairs."

"That's right; nothing like resting on a good bed. I don't think the girl will try to run away."

"She can't—we're watching her too closely."

The pair left the library. Scarcely had they gone when Adam Adams opened one of the blinds, made a quick leap, and came inside.

"That fellow will bear watching, no matter who he claims to be," the detective told himself. "But there is no use of following him now, for he will be back sooner or later. He did not open this safe for nothing."

With the policeman and the stranger gone, the lower portion of the mansion appeared deserted. Adam Adams looked to make sure that he was not observed, and then went to the safe. As he had anticipated, the door now came open with ease.

The detective felt that he was in a ticklish position. Had he a right to examine the contents of this strong box? If discovered by any one, what would be the outcome? Even the fact that he was in a way connected with the law might not clear him.

But he felt he must take some risks. He knew the sentiment against Margaret Langmore, and knew that sentiment in a country place is almost equal to a conviction. The coroner had convinced himself that the girl was guilty, and would go to any extremity to prove the correctness of his theory.

The safe was divided into several compartments, and on one side was a set of three metallic drawers. The open side contained several account books and legal and patent papers. The top drawer contained some old jewelry and a gold watch, the middle drawer some bank bills, not over a hundred dollars, all told.

The bottom drawer was locked, but the key for it lay in the middle drawer, so Adam Adams opened the receptacle with ease. As he did so, a cry of astonishment came to his lips, and he repressed it with difficulty.

The drawer was packed with new and crisp one-hundred-dollar bills, all on the same bank, the Excelsior National, of New York City. There were thirty of the bills, and evidently not one of them had been in circulation. The detective started as he took them up, held them to the somewhat dim light, and started again. He paused for a moment, as if deciding a weighty question. Then he placed the package of bank bills in the inner pocket of his coat.

"These have no right to be here," he muttered. "The only place for them is in the hands of the federal authorities."

Under the bills lay several legal documents. One was labeled:

"Mortgage of Matlock Styles to Barry S. Langmore, $8,000."

There were likewise two other mortgages between the same parties, one for $3,000 and the other for $5,000.

"Whoever Matlock Styles is, he evidently owes the Langmore estate sixteen thousand dollars," the detective told himself; "that is, if the obligations have not been cancelled. I wonder what the mortgages were doing in with those bills?"

"Mr. Adams!"

A soft call from the window made the detective turn swiftly. To his surprise, he saw Raymond Case peering at him through the blinds. The young man's face showed his perplexity.

"What brought you?" asked the detective. He did not relish being caught off his guard.

"I couldn't think of going to bed at the hotel, I was so upset. I thought, if I came over here, I might discover something of value, or help you in some way. I see you've managed to get that safe open. It was certainly a clever piece of work."

"As it happens opening the safe was not my work," was the answer. "Another man opened it and I took the liberty of looking inside. But I can't talk about that here. Wait a minute and I'll join you outside."

Adam Adams swung the door of the safe open once more. As he surmised, the combination could be set to a new series of numbers with ease. He fixed it to correspond with the numbers of his own office safe, then closed the door, gave the knob a twirl, and hurried from the room by the same opening by which he had entered.

"When I first came up I thought somebody was robbing the safe," said Raymond Case, when the pair were at a distance from the house.

"What did you see me do?"

"Take out a package of bankbills and put them into your pocket. Oh, I know it must be all right, Mr. Adams. But it looked queer."

"I took them for safe keeping. Look at them for a moment. I'll strike a match behind this clump of trees. Count them over, too. It may be as well to have a witness for this."

Raymond Case took the crisp bills and did as requested.

"Three thousand dollars," he said. "All brand new bills and each for a hundred dollars."

"Exactly, and each on the same bank."

"So they are. That's rather odd; isn't it?"

"And all of the same serial number."

"Gracious! Mr. Adams——"

"Wait. Mr. Case, I am going to trust you even as you have trusted me. I want you to keep this a secret."

"Certainly, but——"

"The bills are counterfeit."

CHAPTER VII

ONE OF THE PROFESSION

"COUNTERFEIT bank bills!" gasped the young man. "And in Mr. Langmore's possession! Taken from his safe! What does it mean?"

"That remains to be found out."

"This is—is astounding! You don't suspect that he was in the habit—I mean that he——" Raymond Case did not know how to go on.

"It's too early to form a conclusion. But one thing is certain, the counterfeits were in his private safe, and from all accounts that safe had not been opened since his death. Consequently he must have placed them there."

"I don't believe he dealt in counterfeits," returned the young man bluntly.

"Facts are stubborn things to overcome. Down in the town I learned that Mr. Langmore used to be a comparatively poor man. All his wealth has come to him in the past six years."

"He made his money out of his patents and out of various other schemes."

"All of his wealth has come to him in the past six years," pursued the detective. "I happen to know something about these counterfeits, which the federal authorities have been trying to trace to their source. The first of these bogus one hundred dollar bills appeared about six years ago, at a bank in Brooklyn."

The heart of the young man sank within him, and as he spoke his lips began to quiver.

"Mr. Adams, are you going to give this news to the world at large—to the United States authorities—are you going to brand Margaret's father as a counterfeiter, or a passer of queer money? If you do that, even if you clear Margaret, you'll break her heart."

"I am going to do nothing at present but keep on investigating. We have not yet reached the end of this string by any means. Did I not tell you that another opened the safe?—a fellow who has been acting queerly ever since I caught sight of him? He is connected with this complicated affair, although how still remains to be seen."

"Who was the man?"

"He gave his name to the policeman as Jack Watkins."

"I never heard that name before. How does he look?"

Adam Adams described the fellow minutely, but Raymond Case shook his head.

"I can't place him. But that is not strange," he added. "I know very few folks in this neighborhood."

"Do you know a man named Matlock Styles."

"Not very well—I met him once, when he was calling on Mr. Langmore on business. He is an Englishman, fairly well to do, who lives in an old colonial house on the Harper road, a mile and a half, I should say, from here."

"Do you know what business this Styles had with Mr. Langmore?"

"I don't remember very well—but hold up, yes, I do. He owed Mr. Langmore some money. The two put through some sort of real estate deal."

"How much did Styles owe Mr. Langmore?"

"I don't know exactly, but it was a large amount, fifteen or twenty thousand dollars."

"What sort of a man would you take this Styles to be?"

"Oh, he is a big, overbearing Englishman, one of the kind with mutton-chop whiskers and a red nose. He is a great chap for fast horses, and I've heard he has quite a stable of them over to his place. He is also a dog fancier."

"Has he been here lately?"

"I don't know. Perhaps Margaret could tell you. But what has this to do——"

"Nothing at all, perhaps. In the safe with the bankbills were some mortgage papers given to Mr. Langmore by this Matlock Styles. But the two may not have the least connection with each other."

The two had been walking away from the house and now the detective turned back. As he did so he thought of the bit of paper he had picked up in the shrubbery. He struck a match with one hand and held up the slip with the other. It was a memorandum, running as follows:

$8,000
5,000
3,000

$16,000
.03%

$480.00

Adam Adams studied the memorandum with interest. The amounts at the top were those of the mortgages given by Matlock Styles to Barry Langmore. Evidently somebody had figured out what the interest would be at three per cent.

"What is that?" asked Raymond Case.

"A bit of paper I picked up around here. It doesn't seem to amount to anything. But I think we had better part now, Mr. Case. If I have anything to report I'll see you to-morrow at the Beechwood Hotel."

The pair separated, and Adam Adams watched the young man disappear down the road, the latter feeling that he ought not to interfere with the work of the man he had engaged to unravel the mystery. In deep thought the detective went back to the neighborhood of the mansion and stationed himself where he could get a look at the library windows.

Adam Adams felt that the case was growing deeper and deeper. The finding of the counterfeit banknotes in Barry Langmore's safe was astonishing. Where this thread of the skein would lead to he could not imagine.

"I seem to be uncovering more than I bargained for," he mused. "If the man was innocent of all wrong-doing why didn't he turn those bills over to the authorities? Were he alive we should certainly say he was caught with the goods. If this comes out it will create as much of a sensation as the murder itself."

Two hours went by and still the detective kept to his post. He was used to waiting—had he not waited in the bitter cold six hours to clear that poor Jew?—and he knew that sooner or later the man calling himself Jack Watkins would reappear.

A light flared up in the library and then was turned lower. He crept to the window and looked in as before. The strange man was at the safe, working the combination knob backward and forward.

In spite of the seriousness of the situation, Adam Adams was forced to smile. The man worked hurriedly and tried the combination a score of times. He muttered something under his breath which may well be omitted from these printed pages. He even got into a heavy perspiration and had to pause to wipe his forehead with his handkerchief.

"Hang the luck!" he went on. "I had it open before. What's got into the confounded combination?"

Again he tried to work the figures. But it was all of no avail, and at last he arose, fists clenched, and with a face full of baffled anger. He stalked around the library, gazed at the strong box several times, and then quit the apartment.

Waiting once more, the detective presently saw the man come from the house and walk toward the road. Following, he saw the fellow hurry past the Bardon home and then into a patch of timber. Here he had a horse, and in a moment more would have been in the saddle had not Adam Adams caught him by the arm.

"Hi! what's this, a hold-up?" cried the man, evidently frightened. "Let go of me!" And he tried to pull away and then attempted to draw a revolver from a hip pocket.

"Stop! I am not going to hurt you," was the calm reply from the detective. "I want to talk to you, that's all."

"Really?" came with a sneer. "A fine time of night to hold a man up. Be quick, for I am in a hurry."

"I want you to explain several things to me," went on Adam Adams calmly.

"Explain? To you?"

"That is what I said. You can take your choice. Either explain or consider yourself under arrest."

"Eh? Say, are you crazy?"

"Not at all."

"An officer of the law, I suppose."

"I am—in a way."

"Working on this Langmore affair?"

"Yes."

"Have you been following me?"

"I've done more than that—I've been watching you."

"What! How long?"

"Quite a long while. I saw you in the library, twice, and down to the brook."

The man started and was evidently much put out. Then he forced a smile to his face.

"Much obliged for playing the spy," he murmured.

"Down at the brook you had a pair of Miss Langmore's shoes. What were you doing with them?"

"Did you see me with the shoes?"

"I did, and I saw you with the silk shirtwaist."

"Ah! Anything else?"

"I saw you at the safe in the library of the mansion."

"When, now?"

"Now and some hours ago. You may as well make a clean breast of it."

"I will, if you will tell me who you are."

"I am Adam Adams, of New York City."

The strange man let out a hissing sound between his teeth. Then of a sudden he gave a wild, unnatural laugh.

"Shake hands, Mr. Adams," he said, putting out his hand. "I know you by reputation even if not personally. You see, your reputation is so much larger than my own." He laughed again, a sound which grated on the detective's nerves. "I am John S. Watkins, of Bryport. I am connected with the United States secret service."

CHAPTER VIII

WHAT CEPHAS CARBOY SAW

THERE was a brief pause after the man from Bryport made his announcement. Adam Adams tried hard to see his face clearly, but in the gloom this was impossible.

"Perhaps you do not believe me," said John Watkins. "I can easily prove what I say."

"Why shouldn't I believe you?"

"Because you were on the point of arresting me, which proves that you took me to be—something else."

"How long have you been connected with the secret service?"

"About three years. That is why I know you so well."

"Did your work as a secret service man bring you to this place?"

"Excuse me, but that is my business. If you are working on this case, well and good. But it is not fair to try to steal any of my thunder."

"So far as I am concerned you shall get full credit for what you may do on this case, Mr. Watkins," said Adam Adams stiffly. "But I should like to understand several points."

"About the shoes and the shirtwaist, I suppose. I got the shoes from the house to make certain that some footprints on the bank of the brook had been made by Miss Langmore."

"What about the shirtwaist?"

"It was there when I came, and I left it there, as it did not seem to have much of a connection with the affair."

"Do you think you had a right to tamper with the safe in the library?"

"Considering certain circumstances, which I do not intend just now to disclose to you, I think I had a right."

"Did you take anything from the safe?"

"Not a thing. In fact, I couldn't get the safe open. You must know this, if you saw me a while ago."

"You opened the door the first time."

"I do not deny it. The policeman interrupted me and I shut the box up. When I came back the combination had gotten away from me."

There was a pause.

"Where are you stopping, Mr. Watkins, in case I wish to communicate with you again?"

"At Hager's Hotel, in Sidham. But I am on the jump nearly all the time," and the secret service man laughed again. "Anything else?"

"No."

"Then I'll be going. I've got to send a long secret message before I go to bed and it takes time to follow the code, you know that. Good-night," and in a moment more John Watkins was on his horse and riding away at a good rate of speed.

Adam Adams watched his departure with a variety of thoughts chasing each other through his mind. The man must be what he claimed, he had shown his badge on the inside of his coat, and been perfectly willing to prove his words.

"If he is honest, he must be on the trail of those counterfeits, and perhaps it was my duty to tell him of my discovery," mused the detective. "It is curious how these two cases have wound around each other, or is it all one case?"

Concluding that there was nothing more to be done that night, Adam Adams took himself to the Beechwood Hotel, secured a room, and was soon in the land of dreams. He arose early, obtained his breakfast, and without waiting to meet Raymond Case, started off to interview Doctor Bird, one of the two persons Margaret Langmore had seen go past the mansion about the time the tragedy was occurring.

He found the doctor an individual with an exaggerated idea of his own importance. It was hard to bind him down to tell what he actually knew and it took the detective the best part of an hour to learn that the physician knew nothing of real importance.

A short while later Adam Adams learned that the farmer who had been seen going past the mansion was named Cephas Carboy. He was a strange individual, of no education, who lived on a hillside road, running some distance to the rear of the Langmore house. When the detective arrived there he found Carboy sitting under a tree smoking a short clay pipe. The farm was a neglected one, the house about ready to tumble down, and in the dooryard were half a dozen dirty and ragged children, who scampered out of sight on the approach of a stranger.

"Good morning," said Adam Adams cheerfully. He saw at a glance that the fellow before him was a thoroughly shiftless character.

"Mornin' to you," was the short response.

"This is Mr. Cephas Carboy?"

"Cephas Carboy's my name—ain't much of a mister to it," and the man grinned feebly.

"You're the man I want to see, Carboy," and the detective took a seat on a log close by.

"Want to see me? What fer? I don't know you."

"I want to see you about that Langmore murder."

The shiftless man stared and withdrew his pipe from his mouth with trembling fingers.

"I didn't have nuthin' to do with that. They can't pitch it onto me nohow! I came past the house, that's all I did. I didn't go inside the gate, I didn't. It was Miss Langmore did that murder—or else Mary Billings."

"Did you see anybody around the place when you went past?"

"Not a soul."

"What were you doing around there?"

"Are you an—an officer?"

"Perhaps I am. Anyway, you had best answer my questions."

"I went down to Hopgood's place, to sell some fish I had caught—Mr. Hopgood can prove it. Then I came straight home."

"Which way did you go to get to Hopgood's?"

"Took the road yonder, around the hill, and crossed the brook at Peabody's bridge—Peabody can prove that, too. He was out in the hayfield and saw me."

Adam Adams took a look at the road mentioned. At a turn there was a cleared spot through the woods and a fair sight could be caught of the rear of the Langmore mansion and of the automobile shed.

"Come here," he called to Cephas Carboy, and when the shiftless man had shuffled up, he continued: "You say you walked this way. When you got to this spot did you happen to look over to the Langmore house?"

"I—er—I did."

"What did you see? Come now, tell me the exact truth," and Adam Adams put as much of sternness as possible in his tone.

"I saw—See here, I don't want to get in no trouble, I don't. I'm a peaceful man, an' I tend to my own business, I do. You ain't a-goin' to drag me into court."

"I don't want to get you into trouble, Carboy—but I must know the truth of this. I take it that you are poor. Am I right?"

"Humph! Do I look like I was rollin' in wealth?"

"Then a five dollar bill means something to you, eh?"

The shiftless man opened his eyes widely.

"Does it? Say, I ain't had a fiver in my fist fer a month, two months! Farmin' don't pay, an' it ain't easy to git work outside, the season's been that poor. If you——"

"Tell me all you know, and perhaps I'll give you five dollars."

"Ain't foolin'?"

"No. There's a dollar on account," and the detective passed over the bill. The shiftless man clutched it eagerly, looked at it to make certain that it was real money, and rammed it into the pocket of his greasy vest.

"Thanks, sir," he murmured. Then he ran his hand through his somewhat matted hair. "Mind now, I can't give you this fer dead certain," he commenced.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I think it happened, but I can't swear to it. That house is putty far off, remember."

"What do you think you saw?"

"I saw a man run across the garden. He had a satchel in his hand and he was in a hurry. He slipped and fell and his hat rolled off. Then he got up, put on his hat, and I lost sight of him behind the bushes."

"How did the man look?"

"Wait up, that ain't all. I'm certain of that part of it, but I ain't so sure of the rest. I waited here a minit, because my wife was calling to me to git some groceries when I came back. I just started to fill my pipe when I looked over there again and I saw a man run from the automobile shed to the house. The bushes was in the way, but hang me if I don't think he went in by a winder instead of a door."

"You are sure you saw him go toward the house?"

"Yes, that was plain enough, although he seemed to be sneakin' along the bushes."

"Was it the same man?"

"It must have been, but I couldn't see his valise, because he was behind the bushes."

"How did the man look?"

"He was a putty heavy fellow and he was dressed in a light gray suit and wore a soft hat to match."

"Was the valise a light or a dark one?"

"Light."

"Could you see anything else?"

"No."

"Did the man have anything besides the valise?"

"Not that I could see. When he fell and his hat flew off I saw that he had a head of heavy dark hair."

"And you are certain about the suit being a light gray one and the soft hat matched it?"

"Yes, I'm dead sure of that."

"What time was this?"

"About half an hour before I passed the house.

I stopped at Peabody's to chat a while before I crossed his bridge."

"Did you ever see the man before?"

"Not that I remember."

"You didn't see him after that?"

"No."

Adam Adams drew out a roll of bills and counted out four dollars, which amount he passed over to the fellow he had been interviewing.

"That makes the five I promised you, Carboy. Now then, will you do me a favor?"

"Certainly, sir, anything you want."

"I merely want you to keep what you have told me to yourself for the present."

"Oh, that's easy—unless somebuddy tries to git me into trouble."

"I don't think that will happen—if you keep your mouth shut."

"Then I'll be as mum as an oyster," answered Cephas Carboy decidedly.

"I may be along to see you again soon," continued Adam Adams, and then he drove away in the buggy that had brought him to the vicinity.

He allowed his horse to walk, for he was in a more thoughtful mood than ever. He was thinking of a man he had met the day before, in a suit of gray and with a soft hat of the same color. The man had been Tom Ostrello.

CHAPTER IX

ON THE TRAIN

"THIS is clearing itself by growing more complicated."

Such was the deduction of the detective after he had reviewed the situation carefully. Was it possible that the son of the woman who had been murdered was guilty of the double tragedy? He remembered what he had been told about Tom Ostrello and his wayward brother Dick, and how mother and son had had an exciting meeting on the day previous to the tragedy.

"I rather think it will pay to investigate a little further along this line," thought Adam Adams. "More than likely he came here for money, either for himself or his brother Dick. If his mother did not have it and wanted it she would have to go to Mr. Langmore for it. That might cause a bitterness all around. Or again, he might have thought that if his step-father were dead his mother would inherit his money and so plotted one murder, which, when he was discovered, ended in a second. It will do no harm to have a talk with this young man."

He reached the Langmore mansion once more to find that Tom Ostrello had departed for the city on necessary business but was coming back before night. Then at the hotel he found a message from his own office calling him to New York.

"You are going away, Mr. Adams?" said Raymond Case, who chanced to see him departing.

"Not for long. I'll be back to-night or to-morrow."

"Anything new?"

"Nothing worth talking about, yet. I must hurry to catch the train. What are you going to do?"

"I am waiting for the inquest. It will be a terrible trial for Margaret." And the young man's face showed his concern.

"Tell her for me to make the best of it," answered Adam Adams and hurried to the depot. The train was just coming in and he saw Tom Ostrello get on board, and he entered the car directly behind the commercial traveler. The young man passed through to the smoker and the detective did the same. Two seats were vacant, directly across the aisle from each other and each took one. Presently Ostrello looked at Adam Adams and started slightly and then bowed.

"Excuse me, but I think I saw you up to the Langmore house," he began.

"Yes, I called on Miss Langmore. I believe you are Mrs. Langmore's son."

"Yes. Come over, won't you?" Ostrello moved towards the window of the car. "I've got to have a smoke to quiet my nerves, I'm so upset. Will you have one?" And he presented a case full of choice Havana cigars.

"It must have upset you—it's enough to upset anybody," answered Adam Adams, as they lit up. "It's a fearful happening, fearful."

"You are acting for Margaret, I heard."

"Yes—if there is a chance to do anything. Do you know anything of the tragedy?"

"Not a thing, outside of what I have heard. When I got the telegram I was fairly stunned. But let me tell you one thing."

"Well?"

"I don't think Margaret is guilty. A girl like her couldn't do such a cold-blooded deed. Why, it's enough to make a man shiver to think of it. It would take a hardened criminal to do such a thing. It's absurd to even suspect her."

"What is your theory of the murders?"

"I hardly know what to think. If the house had been robbed I would say tramps did it."

"But how?"

"I don't know, excepting the—er—both were smothered. But let us change the subject. It breaks me all up to think about it. I thought a whole lot of my mother."

"Where is your brother?"

"I don't know exactly. He was in Los Angeles the last I heard of him. I have sent messages to half a dozen places, but so far have received no reply."

"He is a commercial traveler like yourself?"

"He was, up to two weeks ago. Traveled for a paint house, but he and the firm had a row and Dick quit. He's a rolling stone, and that is why I can't just locate him."

"Do you represent a paint house, too?" questioned Adam Adams, after a pause, during which he appeared to enjoy the really fragrant Havana Tom Ostrello had tended him.

"No, I'm with a drug house and have been for four years, one of the best in the country, Alexander & Company, of Rochester, New York. I am their salesman for New York and the Eastern States. We make some of the most noted preparations in the trade."

"Alexander & Company, of Rochester," mused Adam Adams, thinking of the bit of paper he had picked up from under the safe. "I believe I have seen their place. Let me see, what street is it on?"

"Wadley street and runs through to Hill—a fine six-story concern, with a laboratory that is second to none."

"Yes, I remember it now. I suppose you must have a pretty good position with them."

"Fair. I think they ought to raise my salary," answered Tom Ostrello. He stretched himself. "I feel sleepy—didn't get a wink last night. When this affair is over I am going to ask for a week's vacation."

"I don't blame you," answered Adam Adams, with a quiet smile.

He settled back to smoke and his companion did the same, and thus the remainder of the trip to the city passed. As he smoked the detective revolved the new revelation in his mind. Tom Ostrello represented the very drug firm whose advertisement had appeared, in part, on the bit of paper picked up from under the library safe.

"And he was there hunting for something," thought the detective. "Was it for that bit of paper or for the something that he secured in his mother's room?"

At the depot the pair separated. Adam Adams lost no time in visiting his office, where his assistant awaited him anxiously.

"Well, Letty, how are you this morning?" he said pleasantly, as he dropped into his chair.

He gave the girl a bright smile and she smiled in return. Letty Bernard was an orphan, the daughter of one of his former friends, and he took a fatherly interest in her. She lived with a second cousin, but wished to be independent and so the detective had given her the position in his office, a place she filled with credit. She was short and plump and had a wealth of curly hair that strayed over her forehead.

"The Chief asked me to give you these papers," said the assistant. "You are to sign all three."

"Um! Then that's the end of the Soper case. Anything else?"

"Glackey was in. He told me he had tracked the German and would report in full by to-morrow. He thinks you were right and the German is the man."

"What else?"

"A Mrs. Caven-Demuth was here. Wished to know if you ever found lost dogs."

"Great Scott! Dogs!"

"She said her pet cocker-spaniel had disappeared and she was willing to spend five hundred dollars on finding him."

"I am no dog detective. Send her to McMommie." McMommie was, as it is easy to guess, a rival.

"I sent her to police headquarters."

"And is that all?"

"Mr. Folett telegraphed that he would be here at ten."

"It's after that now—it's nearly noon. You can go to lunch if you wish. There's the door—Hullo, it's Mr. Folett now. Be back in an hour."

"Yes, Uncle Adam," answered the girl. She always called him uncle, since he had taken such an interest in her. She went out as the caller entered, and left the two men talking over a business matter which has nothing to do with our story.

It was two o'clock before Adam Adams found himself free once more. He procured a lunch and then took a subway train halfway uptown. He walked two blocks westward and ascended the steps of a fine brown-stone residence. He asked for Doctor Calkey and was ushered into a private den, where the doctor, a tall, spare man of sixty, soon joined him.

"My good friend Adams!" cried the doctor, shaking hands warmly. "Where have you kept yourself? Surely you have not been to see me for a year, or is it longer? I have missed you so much—and the comforting smokes we had together! Why did you desert me? You knew I could not come to you—that I never go out. And you do not bring any business to me——"

"I had none to bring, and I have been very busy. But I have missed our meetings, I must confess."

"Ah, I am glad to learn I was not entirely forgotten. And you have been busy, and still nothing for Rudolph Calkey to do, nothing to analyze, nothing to dissect——"

"I've got a knot now for you."

"Good! good! I trust it is a good complication—I love them so—there is such a satisfaction when the end is reached. But not yet—no, not yet. A glass of wine first—something prime—I imported it myself, so that I would know what I am getting."

The wine was soon forthcoming and then a cigar for the detective and a pipe for the doctor. At last the latter threw himself into an old easy chair and gazed at his caller expectantly.

"I am ready to untie the knot," he said. "What is it?"

CHAPTER X

AN AFFAIR OF THE HEART

THERE was a moment of silence.

"Briefly put, doctor, the case is this," said Adam Adams. "I want to know if there is anything known to the medical world, a powder or something of that sort, strong enough to kill a person if he should breathe of it."

"A powder strong enough to kill a person?" The brow of the old physician contracted. "It would have to be very powerful to do that. You mean if a person was boxed up with it—like one killed by gas?"

"No, not at all. I mean a powder that could be held to a person's nose and mouth in the open, when it would make that person sick and give him cramps perhaps."

"And kill him?"

"Yes."

The old doctor rubbed his hands in thought. "That is a subject for speculation. Certain cyanide compounds might be powerful enough to do so under certain conditions. Any real dry powder would choke a person if he got a big dose of it. I heard of a boy who came near dying as the result of breathing in a quantity of extra dry licorice powder. But he was smothered and did not have cramps."

"Nothing in the shape of any foreign compound? You once showed me a Turkish liquid that burnt when water was poured on it, and dyed everything blood red."

"Ah, yes, the *fozeska,* something truly dangerous. But I know of nothing——But hold!" The doctor clapped his hands together. "Yes! yes! That would do it, that and that only."

"What?"

"I had a sample of it given to me some six months ago. It was called *yamlang-peholo,* and was made in China, from the roots of the *yamlang* bush—a rare growth found only in the western part of the country. By many Chinamen the *yamlang* bush is supposed to be accursed, and whenever they come near one they utter a prayer for deliverance from its evils. If you sleep near the *yamlang* bush it will make you very sick."

"And that powder, what did it look like?"

"It was blue at first but on contact with the air quickly changed to brownish-white and lost itself, it was so fine."

"Evaporated?"

"You can call it that if you wish. It was intense. I held it at arms' length, yet it made me sick and I had cramps for over an hour afterwards."

"It would have killed you if you had placed it to your mouth or nose?"

"Not the slightest doubt of it."

"May I ask where you got the stuff?"

"It was imported into this country by a drug firm merely as a curiosity. They put it up in tiny vials which I suppose were sent around to different persons like myself. It was a dangerous piece of business and I gave them no credit for doing it."

"What was the name of the firm?"

"I would not tell everybody, but I know I can trust you to keep a secret. The firm was Alexander & Company, of Rochester, who stand very high in the trade. I buy many things from them, from time to time, and their traveling man, a Mr. Ostrello, gave me the powder when he called. He told me how the firm had experimented on a dog and an ox. Both died in less than two minutes, and each with cramps. But after death neither animal showed the least trace of the poison."

"Wasn't this Ostrello afraid to handle the stuff?"

"Not as much as I was. He said he was a bit used to it. I told him I didn't want to get used to it. Have another glass of wine?"

"No, I prefer to smoke, thanks just the same. I am interested in this *yamlang,* as you call it. Where can I get the stuff?"

"No more of it can be had. I rather think they got afraid of it. Wait, I'll get the vial it was in. Perhaps there is a whiff left in it."

"Thanks, but do you think I want to die?" queried the detective, and gave a laugh.

When the empty vial was produced he opened it and took a short sniff. Then he drew his breath in sharply. A faint odor was perceptible, the same odor he had detected in the carpet on the upper hallway of the Langmore mansion.

"Do you smell it?" questioned the physician.

"Yes, but not very well. I don't think it will affect me much."

"I trust not, my dear Adams. We cannot afford to lose you. Now, what is it all about?"

"Another case, that's all. I don't feel like talking about it just yet. I'll give you the particulars some other time."

"And have I helped you?"

"I think you have."

"Of course there are other powders—and there is chloroform——"

"I think we have struck a clue in this. But I must be going."

"What, so soon!" Rudolph Calkey looked hurt. "I was thinking you'd stay the day out. We could chat over old times—I'll order an extra supper——"

"No, not to-day. When this case is settled, I'll come over and we'll make an evening of it." And then the detective had to fairly tear himself from the doctor and the house. They were old friends and had worked on many a case together.

Once back in his office Adam Adams smiled grimly to himself.

"Now, Mr. Tom Ostrello, it looks as if we had you good and hard," he murmured. "You were seen around the place at the time of the murder by Cephas Carboy, you left the bit of paper in the library, you quarrelled at one time with Mr. Langmore and also quarrelled with your mother. The murder was committed by means of that deadly Chinese powder, and you are one of the few persons in this country who knew of the heathenish compound. If you are innocent I rather reckon you have a heap of explanations to make."

There were two callers who took an hour of the detective's time, and then he prepared to return to Sidham, to learn if possible more concerning Tom Ostrello, and if anybody besides Cephas Carboy had seen him around that vicinity on the morning of the tragedy.

"Letty, I may not be back to-night," he remarked, as he came out into the general office. "And it may be that I'll not be back to-morrow."

"All right, Uncle Adam. What shall I tell Mr. Capes?"

"Tell him that that bond matter must wait. He'll have to get those numbers if he possibly can. The other record was destroyed."

As Adam Adams spoke he drew closer to the desk at which his assistant was sitting. He glanced down at an envelope lying there, and started slightly.

"Where did this come from, Letty?" he questioned. The envelope was postmarked New York and the upper left-hand corner bore the notice:

Return in 10 days to
Alexander & Company,
Wholesale Druggists,
22-32 Wadley Street,
Rochester, N. Y.

The girl glanced at the envelope and then at her employer and blushed deeply.

"Oh, why that—that is a note from a friend of mine."

"A gentleman friend, I suppose."

"Yes, Uncle Adam. I met him last winter, at Mrs. Dally's reception. He is a traveling salesman for this house," she pointed to the notice on the envelope. "He wants me to go to the theatre with him, and I expect to go. Mrs. Dally says he is a very nice young man. We—we have been out a number of times." And the girl blushed again.

"I know some parties connected with that firm. What's the young man's name, Letty?"

"Mr. Tom Ostrello."

"Indeed! And he has invited you to go to the theatre with him?"

"Yes. Then you know him, Uncle Adam? I didn't dream of that. Don't you think he is—is rather nice?"

"Evidently you think so." For some reason the detective could scarcely steady his voice. He was a bachelor, with only some distant relatives, and he thought a good deal of his protegée and her welfare.

"I—I do, Uncle Adam. He treats me so nicely. I—I—don't you approve of him?" she went on hastily, searching his face for the smile that usually rested there when he spoke to her.

"Why, I—er—I don't know him so well as all that, Letty." For the first time in his life he was visibly confused. "You say he has called on you a number of times?"

"Yes, and he has taken me out, let me see, I guess it must be a dozen times all told. I—I wanted to speak of this before, but I—well, I couldn't bring it around. I hope you'll approve, Uncle Adam."

"Approve? Of your going out with him?"

"Yes, and—and——" The girl hesitated again. Then she arose and buried her face on his shoulder. "Oh! don't you understand, Uncle Adam?"

"Letty!"

"He is very nice—I know you'll like him when you get to really know him. Of course he hasn't much money, but I don't care for that. You always said money didn't count for so much anyway—that it was character—and he's got that."

"Hum!" For the life of him Adam Adams could not speak. He felt himself growing hot and cold by turns. He caught the girl closer. Never had he loved his friend's daughter so much as now.

"I hoped you would approve," she went on, shyly. "I—of course I didn't want to leave you—you've been so very good to me since papa and mamma died. But—but Tom doesn't seem to want to wait. He has asked me twice now and—

and—I don't know how I am going to put him off. He seems so miserable when I say wait."

"Asked you to marry him?"

"Yes."

"And he wants you to go to the theatre with him—now?"

"The invitation is for to-night—he sent it last week. He has been traveling out of town, but he said he would be back some time to-day. I want you to meet him." She paused. "Isn't it all right, Uncle Adam?"

He did not answer, and she gazed at him curiously. Then the look in his face made her draw back, slowly and uncertainly. At that moment he felt that the occupation of a detective was the most detestable in the world.

"You—you know something?" she gasped. "Oh, Uncle Adam, what is it?"

CHAPTER XI

AT THE CORONER'S INQUEST

SIDHAM was in a state of keen excitement. No such mystery as the double tragedy had occurred in that neighborhood before, and all of the inhabitants were anxious to hear the latest news and learn what the coroner and the police were going to do. A hundred theories were afloat, all centering on the one object—to find the murderer.

"Find him or her, and swing him or her to the nearest tree," was the verdict of many. "The law is all well enough, but this dastardly crime demands an object lesson."

Coroner Jack Busby, who was a dealer in horses, had never had a murder case before, and was uncertain as to the method of procedure. But with the eyes of the whole community on him he realized his importance, as he ran hither and thither, to arrange for the inquest. He felt that his own little office was altogether too small for the occasion and so arranged to bring off the affair in the general courtroom.

The place was soon crowded with people, and another crowd gathered outside. The hour for opening the inquest was at hand and the majority of the witnesses were present. The coroner, short, fat and bald-headed, looked around anxiously and then turned to the chief of police, who was near at hand.

"I don't see Miss Langmore."

"Neither do I," answered the guardian of the law, with a shrug of his shoulders, as if it was none of his especial business.

"Yes, but—ahem! you are—ahem! responsible——"

"She'll be here, coroner, don't worry."

"You have had her properly guarded?"

"Yes. I reckon she's coming now," and the chief of police nodded towards a side door of the courtroom.

There was a slight commotion, and Margaret entered, escorted by Raymond Case, and followed by one of the women and the policeman who had been on guard at the Langmore mansion. The crowd arose to gaze at the girl and to pass various comments.

"Mighty pale, ain't she?"

"Wouldn't think a girl like that could do such an awful thing!"

"Humph! you can't tell about these high-toned folks. They'd do anything. Didn't one of them millionaires run over two of my hens with his automobile an' never stop to settle the damage? Don't tell me!"

"Yes, and she detested her step-mother—the hired girl told Mrs. Brown so, an' she told me."

"Well, Coroner Busby will git to the bottom of it putty quick. He told Lem Hansom he knew what he was doin'."

"He must know, if he's as slick at tryin' folks as he is in a hoss dicker," returned an old farmer who had made a trade of steeds which had proved unprofitable for him.

Margaret was shown to a chair and sat down, with Raymond beside her. The young man was plainly nervous, yet he did what he could to comfort his companion.

"Courage, Margaret," he whispered. "It is bound to come out right in the end."

"I can scarcely see a friendly face," she faltered, taking a shy look around. "They all think I am——" She could not finish, but had to bite her lip to keep the tears from flowing.

The coroner mounted the platform and rapped on a desk with his knuckles.

"The—ahem! courtroom will come to order!" he called out, gazing around on all sides.

There was a final buzz and then the place became quiet, broken only by the ticking of a big round clock on the wall.

"We are gathered here—ahem! to inquire into the mysterious deaths of Mr. and Mrs. Barry Langmore," went on the coroner.

"That's so—an' we want plain facts," put in an old farmer, sitting well up front.

"Silence!" cried the coroner. "We must have silence!"

"All right, Jack," replied the farmer. "I won't say another word."

"Silence. We cannot go on if there is not silence. Ahem! ahem! Miss Langmore!"

Margaret arose and bowed slightly. Then the coroner swore her in as a witness and told her to relate her story. She could scarcely stand and Raymond brought her chair forward.

"You wish me to tell all I know?" she asked, in a faint but clear voice.

"Everything," was Coroner Busby's answer.

Pausing for a moment to collect her thoughts, she plunged into the recital, her tale being merely a repetition of that given to Adam Adams. When she came to tell how her father had been found her voice broke and it was fully a minute before she could go on. When she had finished the courtroom was as still as a tomb, save for the ticking of the clock, now sounding louder than ever.

"Is that all?" asked the coroner, after a painful pause.

"Yes, sir."

"They say, Miss Langmore, that you were not on good terms with your stepmother."

"Who says so?"

"It is an—ahem! a common rumor. What have you to say on that point?"

"It is true, sir," answered Margaret, after another pause, during which the eyes of all in the courtroom were fixed upon the girl.

"It is said that you had violent quarrels," pursued the coroner.

"No very violent quarrels. Sometimes we did not speak to each other for days."

"Then you admit that you did quarrel?"

"I do."

"And you also quarreled with your father?"

"No, sir."

"What, not at all?" queried Coroner Busby, elevating his eyes in surprise, either real or affected.

"We held different opinions upon certain questions, but we did not quarrel."

"Hum!" The coroner mused for a moment.

"That is all for the present," he added, and Margaret moved back to where she had been first sitting.

"I am glad that is over," whispered Raymond. "Can I do anything? Get you some water?"

"No, nothing," she answered, and dropped a veil over her face.

The next witness called was Mary Billings, the domestic employed at the Langmore mansion, and who had been about the place at the time of the tragedy. She proved to be a round-faced Irish girl, not particularly bright, and now all but terror-stricken. As soon as she was sworn in she burst into tears.

"Sure as there is a heavin above me, Oi didn't do that murder, so Oi didn't!" she moaned.

"Nobody said you did," answered the coroner dryly, while a general smile went around the courtroom.

"Then why did yez bring me here, I dunno? Sure an' Mr. Langmore was afther bein' me bist frind, an' Oi wouldn't harm him fer a million dollars, so Oi wouldn't!" It was with difficulty that she was quieted and made to tell what she knew.

"Where were you from ten o'clock to twelve of the morning of the tragedy?" was the first question put to her.

"Oi was in the kitchen, an' down to the barn, yer honor."

"Were you in the kitchen first."

"Sure an' Oi was that."

"What were you doing?"

"Phat was Oi doin'? Sure Oi was washin' the dishes, cl'anin' the silverware, peelin' the praties, shellin' the beans, cleanin' the lamps, fixin' the——"

"Ahem! You mean you were doing the housework, eh?"

"Yis, sur."

"While you were in the house, did you leave the kitchen?"

"Only to go to the ciller fer a scuttle o' coal."

"Did you see or hear anything unusual going on while you were in the kitchen?"

The Irish girl scratched her head and shrugged her shoulders.

"Oi heard a lot av things, yer honor."

"What were they?"

"Oi heard Mrs. Langmore walkin' around upstairs, an' Oi heard Miss Margaret walkin' around, too. Then Oi heard Mrs. Langmore call to Miss Margaret."

"Did Miss Margaret answer?"

"Oi dunno—if she did, Oi didn't hear her."

"What else?"

"Thin Oi heard the front dure slam."

"Did you see anybody come in or go out?"

"Sure, an' Oi did not."

"What time was this, as near as you can remember?"

"Atwixt tin an' eliven o'clock."

"Did you hear anything after the slamming of the front door?"

"Oi did not, fer Oi wint down to the barn directly afterwards."

"How long did you remain down at the barn?"

"Till Miss Margaret came scr'amin' from the house. She cries, 'Mary, oh Mary! Me father! Me father!' an' staggers around loike she was goin' to fall, an' Oi run up to her an' hild her up, poor dear." And the servant girl shot a sympathetic glance in Margaret's direction.

"Ahem! Now—er—you remained in the barn until you heard her cry out. Did you hear or see anything from the barn while you were down there?"

"Well, to tell the truth, sur, Oi didn't notice anythin' at the toime, bein' that interested in me pet chickens, sur. Ye see, Pat Callahan gave me three foine Leghorns, an'——"

"Never mind the Leghorns. If you saw or heard anything, what was it?"

" 'Twas something Oi was afther hearin', sur. Oi think somebody ran past the barn, aisy loike."

"You didn't see anybody?"

"No, sur. As Oi said before, thim Leghorns that Pat Callahan gave me——"

"We'll—ahem! drop the Leghorns. After you heard the strange noise how long was it before you heard Miss Langmore scream?"

"Perhaps quarter av an hour, sur. Oi didn't look to the clock."

"And she fainted in your arms?"

"Not exactly that, sur. She scr'ams, 'Me father! me father! Mary, he is murdered! Go to the library!' An' thin she wint over in me arms loike a stone, poor dear, poor dear!" And the domestic began to weep afresh.

"What did you do then?"

"Sure, phat could Oi do? Oi scr'amed fer hilp as loud as Oi could, an' thin Mrs. Bardon an' her son, Alfred, the docthor, came over."

"What happened next?"

"We all wint in the house, an' there we found poor Mr. Langmore dead in the library, in his chair. The doctor thought he moight be aloive yit an' had his mother an' me run upstairs fer some medicine from the medicine closet. In the upper hall we kim on Mrs. Langmore's body, also dead, an' I got that scared Oi turned an' flew down the back stairs an' out av the house loike the divil was afther me!"

There was a general laugh throughout the courtroom, at which the coroner rapped loudly on the desk.

"Silence. Such—ahem! conduct at an inquest is not to be allowed. If this happens again I shall clear the courtroom."

"Thet's right, Jack, make 'em behave themselves," came from the old farmer in front. "This is serious business, this is."

"What was done with the body of Mrs. Langmore?" continued the coroner to the servant girl.

"The docther said to lave it till you came."

"Mrs. Langmore was quite dead?"

"Yis. Hivin rest her sowl!"

"And Mr. Langmore?"

"Sure an' the docther could do nothin' fer the poor mon. It made the docther sick to work over the corpse an' he soon had to give it up."

"Now, tell me, how do you think the two were killed?"

"Oi dunno. The docther ought to tell that—sure an' he has the eddication, an' Oi haven't."

"There were no marks of violence?"

"Phat?"

"The victims had not been struck down?"

"Oi dunno as to that, sur—better axed the docther."

"Hum!" Coroner Busby mused for a moment. "How long have you lived with the Langmore family?"

"Iver since Mr. Langmore married his sicond woife."

"How many of the family lived at home?"

"The first year there was the mister and missus an' Miss Jennie an' Miss Margaret. But Miss Jennie married an' moved away—she's travelin' now, they tell me."

"Then Miss Margaret was the only child home?"

"Yis, sur."

"Didn't Mrs. Langmore have two sons?"

"Yis, but they niver lived there. One av thim used to come an' see her now an' thin, an' that's all."

"Was Miss Margaret on good terms with Mrs. Langmore?"

"She was not. Mrs. Langmore was a—a vixin, always afther findin' fault, an' Oi wasn't on good terms wid her meself."

"Ah! Then you quarreled also?"

"Oh, no, sur, Oi knew me place, so Oi did, an' did me wurruk an' said nothin'. If it hadn't been fer Miss Margaret Oi'd a lift me job long ago. But she was such a noice girrul, an' so lonely loike, in the house wid that tongue-lasher——"

"Wait! wait! You say Miss Margaret and Mrs. Langmore quarreled. When did they quarrel last?"

At this question the domestic pursed up her lips and looked at Margaret.

"Oi have nothin' to say about that," she answered coldly.

This reply was a surprise to all, including Raymond. The coroner gazed at the witness sternly.

"You must answer," he said. "It is my duty to get at the bottom of this awful affair."

"Oi'll not answer," was the stubborn return.

CHAPTER XII

FOR AND AGAINST

THERE was a moment of intense silence throughout the courtroom. Every eye was turned on Mary Billings, who pursed up her lips more closely than ever.

"You'll not answer?" thundered Coroner Busby.

"Mr. Coroner," began Raymond, rising, "is it legally necessary that she answer? Remember, she is here without proper legal council."

"Silence! I—ahem—yes, she must answer, or I shall have to commit her, as a witness if for nothing else. Girl, are you going to answer or not?"

"Sure, an' Oi——"

"Chief, will you call a policeman?" went on the coroner, turning to the chief of police.

He was a fairly good judge of human character. At the sight of the bluecoat the domestic wilted and began to sob.

"Ohone! Ohone! don't take me to prison!" she wailed.

"You prefer to answer?"

"Yis, if Oi must. But Oi think Miss Margaret the swatest little lady——"

"Never mind that. When did the girl and her stepmother quarrel last? Come now, tell me the plain truth," and the coroner put as much of sternness as possible in his voice.

"Well, thin, if yez has got to know, it was on the marnin' av the murders, sur," sniffled the servant girl.

"When was this?"

"Right afther breakfast. They had some words at the table, too."

"What was said? Repeat the exact words if you can," and the coroner leaned forward expectantly, while many in the courtroom held their breath.

"Mrs. Langmore said she wished Miss Margaret was off the face of the earth, an' that she'd be afther seein' that the dear girrul wasn't in the house much longer. 'Twas a very bitter scene, an' me heart wint out to the dear girrul——"

"And what did Miss Margaret reply to that?"

"She said it was her father's house, an' she would stay as long as her father wished her to. An' it was her father's house, too."

"And after that?"

"A whole lot more followed, which Oi didn't catch, fer Oi am no avesdropper. But Oi did hear Mrs. Langmore, in a perfect rage, cry out that she'd kill Miss Margaret if the girrul didn't moind her."

"And then?"

"Miss Margaret said she would do as she pl'ased—that she was her own mistress—an' Oi was glad to hear her say it. Mrs. Langmore went on wid her quarrel—sure, an' she had the divil's own tongue, so she had. Thin she must have caught hould av Miss Margaret, fer Oi heard the girrul cry out to lit go or she'd stroike her down. Thin there was more wurruds, hotter an' hotter, an' Mrs. Langmore said she would make the girrul mind as sure as fate, an' thin Miss Margaret got roused up an' she said fer Mrs. Langmore to beware, that she had Southern blood in her veins, an' she wouldn't be accountable fer what she did, if her stepmother wint too far."

There was a pause, and a murmur ran the round of the little courtroom. The testimony seemed to be highly important and many shook their heads. The girl and her stepmother had certainly had a bitter quarrel, the girl had hot Southern blood in her veins, and the bitterness had ended in the tragedy. In the minds of many it was only a question of what the extenuating circumstances might be.

"Was Mr. Langmore present at this quarrel?" asked the coroner, after another pause.

"He was at the breakfast table, but afther that he wint to the bank."

"Did you hear anything more?"

"Not right away, sur. Oi wint to me work. Whin Mr. Langmore came from the bank Oi heard him talkin' to Miss Margaret."

"What was said then?"

"Oi dunno exactly, exceptin' that he said he was sorry she an' her stepmother had quarreled, an' he wanted her to make it up wid his woife."

"And what did Miss Margaret say to that?"

"She said that all she wanted was to be left alone."

"What else?"

"Oi didn't hear anything more, as Oi wint to the ciller fer coal. By an' by Oi see Miss Margaret in the garden cryin'. Oi wanted to go to her, but Mrs. Langmore kim to the kitchen an' Oi had to attind to me wurruk."

"How did Mrs. Langmore seem to appear when she came to the kitchen?"

"Sure an' she was very excited an' findin' more fault than iver. She stayed only a few minutes, an' thin wint to the library, an' that was the very last Oi saw av her. Oi'm sorry she's dead, but she had that divil's own temper!" And the domestic heaved a long sigh.

"That will do. You may sit down." The coroner looked around the courtroom. "Is Doctor Bardon present?"

For reply the young physician came forward from one side of the room. He looked pale and slightly troubled. In a low voice he corroborated the testimony already given regarding the finding of the two bodies, and told what he had done in his effort to restore Mr. Langmore to life.

"I thought there might be a spark there still, but I was mistaken," he went on. "He looked so natural—and Mrs. Langmore looked natural, too, for the matter of that. But both were stone dead."

"What was the cause of death?"

"That is something of a mystery. I have tried my best to get at the bottom of it, but I cannot, nor can my colleague, Doctor Soper."

"Were the pair strangled, smothered, poisoned?" suggested the coroner.

"I have a theory that they were poisoned, but not in an ordinary way. Neither Doctor Soper nor myself could find any traces of ordinary poison."

"What is your theory?"

"Something was used to stupefy them, and so much was used that it killed them."

"In that case the murder might have been unintentional?"

"Yes. Somebody might have thought to stupefy Mr. Langmore and then rob him. But the drug, being too powerful, or used too long, might have done its deadly work. Then the crime may have been discovered by Mrs. Langmore and the murderer might have turned on her to conceal his first wrongdoing."

"Hum. Have you—ahem! any idea of the nature of the poison?"

"No, excepting that it had a very powerful odor. When I bent over Mr. Langmore I got several whiffs of it and it made me sick at the stomach. But the odor was soon gone."

"And you have no idea what the poison was?"

"No, nor has Doctor Soper. It may be something new, or something little known. Chemists are constantly discovering new things," went on the young physician, bound to clear himself of any suspicion of ignorance concerning medical matters.

"You found no marks of violence, as if there had been a struggle?"

"The only marks I found were two scratches on the right arm of Mrs. Langmore, right above the wrist, and a scratch on Mr. Langmore's left cheek."

"Finger nail scratches?"

"Possibly, or else they may have been made by a ring or bracelet—if there was a struggle."

"Hum! Have you anything else to tell, doctor?"

"I have not. I am willing to tell all I know."

There was another pause, as the young physician stepped back. The coroner was about to call one of the women set to guard Margaret and the Langmore mansion, when he suddenly turned.

"Miss Langmore, you will please take the stand again," he said, and the girl did so, throwing aside her veil. "Are you in the habit of wearing finger rings and bracelets?"

It was a leading question and several gasped as they heard it. Raymond started to rise up, but then sank back again.

"I do not wear bracelets," answered Margaret. "I have two rings."

"What kind of rings are they?"

"One is a plain gold band. It was my mother's wedding ring." The girl's voice sank low suddenly. "The other is a diamond ring, as you can see," and she held up her hand.

"Will you let me have the diamond ring?"

"Yes, sir." She took it off. "But please be careful of it, for it—it is very precious to me."

The coroner nodded. "That is all just now," and as Margaret let fall the veil again, he called Doctor Bardon to his side. A whispered conversation ensued, and the young physician left with the precious circlet—Margaret's engagement ring—in an envelope.

"Margaret, you should not have let him have that ring," whispered Raymond.

"How could I help it?" was the low answer. "Oh, this is terrible! I feel as if everybody was trying to look me through and through!"

"I can't understand why Mr. Adams is not here," went on the young man. "Perhaps he has found some important clew and is following it up," he added hopefully.

"They are bound to convict me, Raymond! Isn't it horrible?"

"They shall never do it, never!" cried the young man. And then a sharp rapping on the desk terminated the brief conversation and restored quietness to the little courtroom.

CHAPTER XIII

THE WEIGHT OF EVIDENCE

THE next witness called was Mrs. Morse, who told briefly how she had been placed in charge of the upper part of the Langmore mansion shortly after the tragedy, and how she had been watching Margaret. She said the girl had had only a few visitors, mentioning Raymond Case and a stranger from New York.

"Who was the stranger?" asked Coroner Busby.

"A Mr. Adams. He's either a lawyer or a detective."

"Oh!"

"I brought Mr. Adams to see Miss Langmore," put in Raymond. "Wasn't that all right?"

"Certainly—certainly," answered the coroner hastily.

"I have kept the best watch on Miss Langmore that I could," went on the woman. "You told me to do it."

"Has Miss Langmore had anything to say about her father?"

"She seems to be very sorry that he is dead."

"What did she say about Mrs. Langmore?"

"She does not seem to care much about her stepmother."

"Have you discovered anything unusual, Mrs. Morse, that had to do with this tragedy?"

"Well, I don't know. I have looked around a bit, and among other things I found this. It was in Miss Langmore's dressing case."

As she spoke the woman held up a small bottle. It was marked chloroform and was empty.

"Anything else?"

"With the empty bottle I found the half of a big silk handkerchief. It was wrapped around the bottle and had Miss Langmore's monogram in the corner. I went on hunting around the house and I found the other half of the handkerchief in a dark corner of the upper hallway, not far from where Mrs. Langmore's body was found."

At this announcement there was a buzz of excitement. All present looked at the witness and then at Margaret. The girl had thrown aside her veil once more, and was standing up, with a face as pale as death itself.

"I—I—may I speak?" she faltered.

"Yes."

"I bought that chloroform a month ago and used it to put a sick canary and a sick parrot out of their misery. Mary Billings saw me chloroform the parrot."

"When did you do the chloroforming?"

"About a week ago, on the parrot. The canary I chloroformed when I obtained the drug."

"Sure, and that's roight, sur," broke in the servant girl.

"Then you know all about using chloroform?" remarked the coroner dryly.

"The druggist told me."

"Did it take all you had for the birds?"

"No."

"What did you do with what remained?"

"I threw it away, for I had no further use for it."

"Hum." The coroner turned to Mary Billings. "Did you see her throw the chloroform away?"

"N—no," stammered the servant girl. "But if she says she did, she did," she added stoutly.

"Now, Mrs. Morse, did you find anything else of value?"

"I did not, but Mrs. Gaspard, who was in charge downstairs, did."

"Very well, you may step down. Mrs. Gaspard!" And the other woman came forward to face the coroner and his jury, and was sworn.

"Mrs. Morse says you found something of importance. What was it?"

"It was this, Mr. Busby," and the woman held out a sheet of note paper. "I came across it on the stairs leading to Miss Langmore's room. Shall I read it?" And as the coroner nodded, the woman read as follows:

"Since you refuse to open your room door to me, let me give you fair warning. You must either obey your mother that now is, and me, or leave this house. I have had enough of your willfulness and I shall not put up with it any longer."

As the woman finished reading she handed the paper to the coroner.

"Ahem! Mrs. Gaspard, do you know who wrote this note?" asked the latter.

"The handwriting is exactly like Mr. Langmore's. I have compared the two, and so have Mrs. Morse and Mr. Pickerell, the schoolmaster."

Again all eyes were bent upon Margaret. She had again arisen and was swaying from side to side.

"My father—never—never sent me—never wrote such a note——" she gasped, and then sank back and would have fallen had not Raymond supported her.

"A glass of water, quick!" cried the young man, and it was handed to him, and also a bottle of smelling salts. In a moment more Margaret revived.

"Take me away," she moaned.

"I am sorry, but that cannot be allowed," replied the coroner. "You will have to remain until this session is over."

"It's an outrage!" exclaimed Raymond, his eyes flashing. "You are all against her, and you are going to prove her guilty if you possibly can. The whole proceedings is a farce."

"Silence, young man, or I'll have you removed by an officer. You have interrupted the proceedings several times. I do not know what interest you have——"

"I am not ashamed to tell you of my interest, sir. I am engaged to this young lady. I know she is innocent. It is preposterous to imagine that she would kill her own father. They loved each other too much."

"Yes, but this note——" piped in Mrs. Gaspard. She was a strong believer in Margaret's guilt.

"I know nothing about that. It may be a forgery. I know Miss Langmore is innocent."

"To merely say a thing does not prove it," came from the coroner. "We want facts, nothing else—and we are bound to have 'em." He began to warm up also. "I'm here to do my duty, regardless of you or anybody else. I ain't going to shield anybody, rich or poor, high or low, known or unknown! Now, you sit down, and let the inquest proceed." And Raymond sat down, but with a great and growing bitterness filling his heart. He looked at Margaret and saw that she was trembling from head to foot.

There was an awkward pause.

"Mrs. Gaspard, did Mr. Pickerell say he thought Mr. Langmore had written this note?" questioned the coroner.

"He said the two handwritings were exactly alike. Here is a letter written and signed by Mr. Langmore. You can compare the two, if you wish."

The letter was passed over and not only the coroner, but also his jury, looked at both documents carefully.

"Pretty much the same thing," whispered one man.

"Exactly the same," added another, and the rest nodded.

The coroner looked around the courtroom and then at the jury.

"Have any of you any questions to ask?" he queried of the men. "If not we'll take a brief recess until Doctor Bardon returns."

One after another the jurors shook their heads. Whatever the coroner did was sufficient for them. Coroner Busby had picked men he knew would agree with him.

The recess had lasted but a few minutes, when Doctor Bardon reappeared. His face wore a knowing look that was almost triumphant.

"You will please take the stand again, doctor," was the request. "I wish to ask you if a person could be smothered by chloroform."

"Certainly, under certain conditions."

"Do you think it possible that Mr. and Mrs. Langmore could have been smothered in that way?"

"Possibly, yes, although I did not see any traces."

"Would there have been traces?"

"Yes and no—it would depend on circumstances."

"Hum. Now about the diamond ring belonging to Miss Langmore, which I gave you a short while ago to examine? Have you—ahem—examined it?"

"I have, and so has Doctor Soper. We used a magnifying glass and made several tests."

"Did you find anything unusual?"

"We did. In the first place two of the prongs which hold the diamond in place are bent out and up in such a fashion that each forms a sharp point. We next looked under the stone and found there a substance which both of us are convinced is a bit of dried-up blood."

"You are sure it is blood?"

"Yes. I can illustrate it scientifically, if you desire."

"It will not be necessary just now. When you say blood do you mean human blood?"

At this the young physician shrugged his shoulders.

"I am not prepared to go as far as that. We should have to make another test. The amount was so very small."

"Might be blood from a mosquito," muttered Raymond. "There are enough around here."

"You may think as you please," said the young doctor. "I am only stating the facts."

"Have you anything else to say, doctor?" came from the coroner.

"Nothing more. Here is the ring. We have kept what we found under the stone."

"Very well. Miss Langmore, you may have the ring back." It was passed out and Raymond took it and slipped it back on Margaret's hand, which was cold and nerveless. The girl was sitting as motionless as a marble statue.

There was another pause and then, one after another, several minor witnesses were brought up and examined. At four o'clock the coroner began to sum up the evidence, to which the jury listened with close attention. Then the jurors filed out into a side room, the door to which was tightly closed.

"Is—is it over?" faltered Margaret. "Wha—what will they do next?"

"We must wait for the finding of the jury, Margaret."

"How long will that take?"

"I don't know."

"Mr. Adams did not show himself. I thought he would help us in some way."

"He must have a good reason for staying away."

"What do you think the jury will do?"

At this direct question, the young man gave an inward groan. "I don't know," he answered in an unnatural voice. "We must hope for the best."

In less than an hour it was announced that the jury had arrived at a verdict. Those who had left the courtroom returned and the jurymen filed in. The excitement was subdued, but plainly at a white heat. The coroner took his place at the desk.

"Gentlemen of the jury, have you agreed upon a verdict?" was the question put.

"We have," was the unanimous answer.

"Who will speak for you?"

"Mr. Blackwell, our foreman."

"Very well. Ahem! Mr. Blackwell, what is the verdict?"

Mr. Blackwell, a well-known citizen of the town, stood up. The courtroom became intensely silent.

"We find that Mr. and Mrs. Barry Langmore came to their deaths either by being smothered, chloroformed, poisoned, or in some similar fashion, the direct means not yet being brought to light, and we find that the evidence points to Margaret Langmore as the one who committed the murders."

Hardly was the verdict rendered than a wild cry rang out through the courtroom. Margaret staggered to her feet, put out her hands in an uncertain fashion, and then dropped senseless into Raymond's arms.

CHAPTER XIV

IS THIS MADNESS?

INSTANTLY there was wild confusion, and half a dozen persons sprang forward to assist Raymond with his burden. But he waved them back.

"Let her have air," he said. "Don't crowd so close. She must have air," and he moved towards a window. The crowd separated to let him pass and allowed him the use of an entire bench, while more water was brought and the bottle of smelling salts was again produced. In the meantime the coroner whispered to the chief of police, who in turn whispered to a policeman, and the two minions of the law followed Raymond.

Margaret lay like one dead, every particle of color having forsaken her cheeks. Raymond waited anxiously, and then applied his ear to her heart.

"A doctor!" he cried hoarsely. "A doctor, for Heaven's sake! She is dying!"

Doctor Bardon came forward, followed by

Doctor Bird, and both looked at the unconscious one closely and critically. There was no shamming here—the shock had been heavy—the bolt had struck home.

"This is serious, truly," murmured the older physician. "We had better remove her to a side room and loosen up her garments."

Many were willing to assist, but Raymond shook them off and he and Doctor Bird carried Margaret into the room where the jury had arrived at the verdict which had so stunned her. Then a nurse who happened to be in the courtroom was called in, and she and the physician began to work over the suffering girl.

"Doctor——" Raymond could scarcely speak. "She will—will come around all right?"

"Why, I guess so. She has swooned, that is all. The trial was too much for her. And then there was such a crowd, and the ventilation being poor——"

The young man waited, five, ten, fifteen minutes—it was as an eternity. The doctor still continued to work, and so did the nurse. Then the latter whispered something and Raymond caught the words, "a mental shock, by her eyes."

"What's that?" he questioned. He looked at Margaret and saw that her eyes were wide open and she was staring hard at him. "Margaret!"

She did not answer, but continued to stare, turning from him to the nurse and then to the old doctor. The chief of police was at the doorway and she gave him a look that fairly froze his blood.

"Who——" she began and stopped short. "How light it is! What struck me? Why are you all staring at me in this manner? What have I done? Where am I? Have I been sick?"

"Margaret!" Raymond came closer and took her hand. "Margaret!"

She stared at him and flung his hand away. "I've had a horrible dream—I dreamed papa was murdered—that somebody had strangled him! Strangled him to get my engagement ring from me! And there was blood there, blood, and nobody could come to the lawn party. Oh, if they knew—and my poor head—it swims so! And the bottle—the handkerchief——"

"Margaret, Margaret! Don't go on so!" He caught her hand again and sank down on his knees beside her. "Be calm. It will all come out right. You fainted, that's all. Don't you remember, Margaret?"

"Yes, yes, I remember. You said you would marry me, and then you said, *you,*" she tore her hand away and pointed her finger at him, "you said I had murdered papa and murdered her!

Oh, the shame of it, the shame!" And then she gave a shriek and began to rave, tearing at her clothes and her hair, until the latter fell all over her face. The paroxysm lasted for several minutes and then she fainted once more.

"I shall have to give her something to quiet her," said the doctor. "She is in a worse state than I at first imagined. The strain has been entirely too much for her nervous system. We must get her to some quiet spot."

"Shall we take her home?" asked Raymond.

"No, I would not advise that, Mr. ——"

"My name is Raymond Case."

"My home is a quiet one," spoke up the nurse. "If you wish you can take her there. It is not very far from here."

"Besides," the old doctor paused. "The coroner has something to say about it."

"Coroner Busby has turned the prisoner over to me," came from the chief of police, and he advanced a few feet into the room.

"The prisoner!" faltered Raymond. "Oh, yes, I suppose that is right. But you can't take her to jail. I'll go her bail for any amount he may fix."

"Sorry, Mr. Case, but they don't take bail on such a charge as murder."

"But you can't lock her up in this condition—it would be inhuman. I'll have her taken to some quiet place and you can have a guard set—I'll pay all the bills. Ask the coroner if that won't do. She isn't going to run away. She looks now more as if she might die!" and he gave a groan that came straight from his heart.

The chief of police had once been young and in love with a pretty girl and his face softened. Then he remembered what Raymond had said about paying the bills.

"I'll fix it up with Busby," he said. "Go ahead and do what you wish, only don't take her out of town."

A little later a carriage was brought around and Margaret was placed inside and driven rapidly to the home of Martha Sampson, the nurse. She began to rave again, but the physician gave her a quieting potion, which put her in a sound but unnatural sleep. She was placed in a pretty and comfortable bedroom on the second floor in the rear, so that she might not be annoyed by those passing the house in front. Two policemen, in plain clothes, were put on guard, one relieving the other.

In the meantime the news that Margaret had been adjudged guilty by the coroner's jury spread like wild-fire, and the curiosity seekers could scarcely be kept away from the place to which the poor girl had been taken.

"The grand jury can't do anything but indict her," said more than one. "And, if there is any justice left, she'll surely be electrocuted."

It was a bitter blow to Raymond, to have Margaret thought guilty, but he did not think of that as he sat by her side, or walked up and down in the little hallway just outside of her door. Her staring eyes haunted him and he longed for a look that should tell him her reason had once more asserted itself.

The doctor had come and gone twice and had promised to come again that evening. Slowly the hours wore away. The nurse had gone below to prepare herself something to eat, and Raymond stood by the suffering one's bedside. He saw the eyelids of the one he loved quiver slightly.

"Margaret!" he said softly, bending over her.

There was no response and he repeated the name several times. Then her eyes opened full.

"Where am I?" she asked vacantly.

"You are safe, with me," he answered and took her hand.

"With you, Raymond? Where?"

"At the home of a lady who is going to take care of you for the present."

"How queer! I thought I was at my own home."

"We thought it best to bring you here. Miss Sampson will do all she can for you. The doctor said you must be kept very quiet." He smoothed down her hair. "You have had a terrible trial, my dear."

"A trial? I don't remember it. What was it?" She stared vacantly at him. "Oh, how queer my head feels!" And she put one cold hand to her temple.

"Never mind trying to think now, Margaret. Just take it easy. The doctor will come back in a little while and he will give you something that will make you all right again."

"How long have I been here?"

"Only four hours. Now please, don't worry."

"I can't—I can't think—it's all like a terribly dark cloud, Raymond." She stared in a wild fashion and then a look of untold horror crossed her drawn features. "Ah! Yes, yes, I remember now! I remember!" She shook from head to foot. "I remember! The courtroom! And those many men and women! And the ring—our engagement ring—think of that, Raymond! They found blood on it, blood!" And she shivered again.

"Margaret, dearest, you must try to keep quiet," he interrupted soothingly. "It will all come out right, I feel certain of it."

"Right? I don't know what you mean by that word. Was I on trial, or what?"

"No, not on trial. It was simply the coroner's inquest. But don't think of it, dear." He tried to brush back her hair, but she stopped him. The wild look in her eyes was increasing.

"The inquest? Oh, yes, I know now, and they said—they said——" She gave a piercing scream. "They said I had killed her and killed my own father! Yes, that I had killed them! Do you hear, Raymond, I had killed them!" She sat up and motioned him away. "Do not touch me! Do not come near me!"

"Margaret!" he interrupted appealingly.

"No! no! It is too late, too late!" Her voice sank to a hoarse whisper. "I see it all—the blood on the ring, the chloroform, our quarrels, and what she said to me, and then, and then——" She gave another scream. "Go away! go away! You must not come near me again!"

"But Margaret, dear——"

"No, I cannot listen! You must go away, and let them take me to prison, let them hang me if they will!" Her voice sank still lower. "There is nothing else to do—I see the end. They have cornered me, have found me out! Yes, they have found me out!" She gave a wild, uncanny laugh that made his flesh creep. "Ha! ha! I thought they could not do it, but they did. They have found me out! They have found me out!" And then, with another scream, she pitched back and lay again like one dead.

CHAPTER XV

LOVE VERSUS BUSINESS

"UNCLE ADAM, you must tell me everything. Do you hear?—everything!"

"But my dear Letty, I am not sure of these things. I only want you to wait. That's easy enough, isn't it?"

"It will be, if you tell me everything. But I can't wait if I am kept in the dark." The girl raised her tear-stained face to that of the detective. "Oh, I am sure you will do the best you can and all that—you have always been so kind to me. But—but I must know the details."

A half hour had passed since he had discovered that Letty Bernard was in love with Tom Ostrello, that she had been in love with the traveling man ever since they had first met. He had heard her whole tale, how the young man had taken her out and how they had planned for the future—a tale not uncommon even in these plain, common-sense days, when Romance lingers only on the outskirts of society. He had been tremendously interested, as much so as if the girl was his own flesh and blood.

"Of course, he invited me to the theatre before he knew of the death of his mother," Letty went on. "And I suppose he has been so upset he hasn't thought to notify me. But he might have sent me word," she added wistfully. "I should have done so if it was my mother."

"He is not like you, Letty."

"Well, he is just as good."

"That remains to be seen."

"Are you going to tell me what you have in your mind or not, Uncle Adam?"

He gazed at her fondly. How could he tell her? And yet, if his suspicions were correct, it would be better for her to know the truth now than to be struck down by it later on.

"There is nothing very definite, Letty," he said slowly. "You know that all detectives get on the wrong trail at times—I have made a mess of more than one case—you know that, even if the general public doesn't."

"Then he is suspected of these murders?" she said boldly.

"If you must have the whole story, I'll tell it to you. It is certainly a curious situation. At first suspicions pointed to Mr. Langmore's daughter; now they appear to point to Mrs. Langmore's son. For your sake and for the sake of Miss Langmore, who appears to be a very nice young lady, I trust we shall be able to prove some outside party guilty."

"Tom isn't guilty, I am sure of that."

"And Raymond Case is equally certain that Miss Langmore isn't guilty."

"He is the young man who came here and engaged you?"

"Yes."

"Is he engaged to her?"

"Yes."

"Then, of course, he thinks her innocent."

"I think her innocent myself."

"Do you think Tom is guilty?"

At this direct question Adam Adams winced. He saw before him a disagreeable duty which must be performed.

"I see I must give you the facts, Letty. But I will do so on one condition only, and that is, that you keep what I have to say to yourself—considering them as office secrets."

"Very well, Uncle Adam, I'll promise," she answered, with a pale face upturned to him. He bent down and kissed her on the forehead. Then he locked the office door, sat down in an armchair and let her sit on his lap, just as she had done since childhood.

His recital took the best part of an hour, and he gave all the particulars of his interview with Cephas Carboy and with Doctor Calkey, and told of the finding of the bit of paper with the address of the drug firm on it, and of the strange Chinese poison. At the mention of the fatal drug she drew a sharp breath.

"I—I——" she began, and stopped short.

"Do you know anything of that drug, Letty? Perhaps he spoke to you about it?"

"He did, once, when we were speaking of poisons. He said he was glad his firm had decided not to handle it, for it was too dangerous. It has a power that most folks do not know about."

"The power to kill people, I suppose."

"No, not that. He said it was a fatal drug, but more than that, he said it had a strange power, according to the Chinese chemists who manufactured it. That power was, if it was used on a person and did not kill it would, in a few days or a week, make that person mad."

"Humph! Worse and worse! Such a drug should be banished by law. But to go on with my story, if you must hear the whole of it. I am fairly certain it was that drug which was used to kill Mr. and Mrs. Langmore."

"But Tom did not use it," she insisted. "Somebody else must have gotten the drug from him or from his traveling sample case."

"That is possible. Now there is another side to this case, which I cannot understand at all." And then he told of the counterfeit bank bills.

"Counterfeits!" she exclaimed, and the color began to leave her face once more. "What kind of bills were they, Uncle Adam?"

"They were one hundred dollar bills, on the Excelsior National Bank of New York City."

She gave a gasp and clenched her little hands to control herself. He could not help but notice her increased agitation.

"What is it, Letty? Do you know——"

"Oh, Uncle Adam, do not ask me," she gasped. "I—I—there is some mistake—Tom did not——" she failed to go on and looked at the detective hopelessly.

"What do you know about these counterfeits? Come, it is best that you tell me everything," he continued kindly, but firmly.

"To—Tom had a counterfeit one hundred dollar bill. He—we went to the theatre and he got into some trouble over it, until he convinced the ticket seller that he did not know it was bad."

"Did he tell you where he got the bill?"

"No, he said he got stuck, that's all."

"Do you know what he did with it?"

"He said he was going to give it back and get a good one for it, if he could."

At that moment a postman's whistle sounded in the hallway and several letters dropped through the slit in the door. The girl glanced at them, and uttering a faint cry, arose and picked them up.

"Here is one from Tom now." She tore it open and glanced at it hastily. "I knew it," she went on. "He is all upset because of the murder and scarcely knows what to do. He had an important engagement in Albany for yesterday and one in New York for to-day, but has broken both. He says he will come to me as soon as he can, and adds a postscript asking me to look in the papers for the particulars of the awful affair. You read it, Uncle Adam. That doesn't look much as if he were guilty, does it?"

The detective took the communication and scanned it with care. It had evidently been penned in a hurry and was signed, "Your own Tom." One line read: "I hope with all my heart that the authorities bring the guilty party to justice."

"How could he pen that if he was guilty himself?" said Letty, pointing to the line. "Oh, Uncle Adam, you must look elsewhere for the one who did this foul deed."

"I wish I knew where he got that counterfeit?"

"Perhaps I can find out for you."

"Can you tell me where he stays when in New York?"

"At the Kingdon House, on Broadway."

"Then I may look him up."

"Cannot I do something?"

"Yes—wait and keep quiet, Letty."

"But you will try to clear him, if you can, won't you?"

"I am going to try to find the guilty party."

"It is dreadful to remain here and do nothing, with such a cloud hanging over one."

"Then take a vacation. It will do you good. Get Miss Harringford to come in here—she knows the ropes—and you go off in the country or to the seashore. I'll make you an allowance of fifty dollars for the trip. Take it out of the cash on hand. And, Letty, don't worry too much."

The girl smiled, but it was not a smile to please one. "Very well, I'll go off," she said, and turned back to her desk. "I'll take the time off to help clear poor Tom," she murmured to herself.

CHAPTER XVI

SOMETHING ABOUT A SECRET SERVICE MAN

On the following morning the newspapers brought to Adam Adams the full particulars of the Langmore inquest, with the finding of the coroner's jury. The papers also described how Margaret Langmore had fainted and been placed at a nurse's residence, under the care of a physician and guarded by the police. By a few it was supposed that the girl's illness was genuine, but the general opinion was that it was assumed, in order to draw public sympathy. Raymond Case was pictured as a loyal, but misguided young man, and it was hinted that his relatives were much chagrined to see him remaining at the accused girl's side, in view of the evidence which had been brought to light.

The detective read the accounts with interest and then leaned back in his office chair in a thoughtful mood. Letty had absented herself and in the outer office was another girl, who had done substitute work before. Suddenly the detective arose with decision, went to the telephone, and rang up Central.

"Hullo!"

"Give me 45678 Park."

There was a buzz and then a heavy voice came over the 'phone.

"Hullo!"

"Is that you, Vapp?"

"Yes. Is this Mr. Adams?"

"Yes. Are you particularly busy?"

"Not if there is any money afloat," and a chuckle came over the wire.

"I want you to do some shadowing for me. I don't know how long it will take. It's a man—a commercial traveler. You can pick out your own make-up."

"When am I on?"

"Right away."

"Want me up there first?"

"I think it will be best. I want to give you some details."

"I'll be there in half an hour and all ready for the job."

Adam Adams busied himself in various ways, and at the end of half an hour, a well-dressed, middle-aged man came in, carrying a small sample case in one hand.

"Hullo, going to be a commercial traveler yourself, eh?" commented the detective.

"It will give me an easy way to get around," answered Charles Vapp. "I'm Andy Weber, representing the Boxton Seed Company. A seed man can go anywhere, in the city and the country. I got the outfit from old Boxton himself. He thinks it a good joke and he will keep mum. Now, what's the game?"

"I want you to do some shadowing for me."

"All right—that's my line."

"This is a bit out of the ordinary, Vapp."

"Well, that makes it more interesting. Who is the party?"

"The fellow's name is Tom Ostrello."

"Foreigner, eh?"

"No, he is American-born—the son of Mrs. Langmore."

"You don't mean the woman who was murdered with her husband?"

"Yes. He is a commercial traveler for a drug concern."

"Good! I'm glad I elected to be a traveler myself."

"As I said, Vapp, this is no ordinary case. I want you to keep track of this man day and night."

"I'll do it—if it can be done."

"I want you to note every person he communicates with."

"I'll do that, too."

"And here is another thing of great importance. If he spends money, try to find out if it is good money."

"Eh?" The shadower looked surprised for an instant. "You want me to look out for counterfeits?"

"Exactly."

"That is not so easy, but I'll do my best," went on Charley Vapp, and then he asked a number of questions regarding Tom Ostrello, all of which Adam Adams answered as well as he was able.

"You are to stay on this case until I tell you to drop it," said the detective. "And remember, if anything unusual occurs, let me know as soon as you can reach me."

"I understand. Anything more?"

Adam Adams mused for a moment.

"Yes. You know Miss Bernard, who works for me here?"

"Sure."

"Well, take care that she doesn't see you shadowing Ostrello."

"I'm wise," answered the shadower, smiling, and the next moment he was gone. He was not flustered by what was before him, for he had been shadowing people for eleven years, and as long as there was five dollars per day and his expenses in the work, he was willing to continue indefinitely.

With the shadower gone, Adam Adams meditated for a moment and then donned his walking coat and his hat. In his pockets he placed several large but rather flat packages.

"I am going out, Miss Harringford," he said to the clerk. "If I am not back by five o'clock, you may lock up and go home. Be on hand as usual in the morning."

Down in the street he hopped aboard a passing car and rode eight blocks. He entered an office building, went up in an elevator to the third floor, and took himself to a suite of offices occupied by certain United States secret service officers.

"I want to see Mr. Breslow," he said, and was shown to a private apartment, where an elderly man sat, studying several reports.

"How are you, Adams!" was the greeting. "Rather busy to-day, but what can I do for you?"

"I want to sell you some bank bills," was the reply, and Adam Adams dumped the package on the desk. Mr. Breslow opened it and examined the contents.

"By the jumping Judas! Where did you get those? Say, this is worth while."

"I guess you haven't rounded up quite as many as I have, have you?" said the detective, with a grim smile.

"As many? Why, man, we've only run across sixteen so far, and you've got thirty. They are such a clever counterfeit that even the banks get nipped. This is wonderful! I didn't know you were following this trail. Why didn't you say something before? Or maybe you wanted to spring a surprise, and make some of the boys down here feel cheap."

"No, it was nothing but blind luck. I wasn't on the trail at all. I simply stumbled over the bills."

"Did you get your man?"

"There was no man to get."

"Do you mean to say you found the bills?"

"I did and I didn't. They were in the safe of a man who was murdered. I guess I'll have to tell you the best part of the story," and Adam Adams did so. "This is, of course, confidential," he went on.

"Trust me for that, Adams. Strange complication, as you just remarked. I suppose you are going to follow up the murder mystery. Will you follow this up, too?"

"I think so. I can't get it out of my head that the two are related to each other."

"More than likely. Now, you just said you wanted to know something."

"I want to know about this John S. Watkins, of Bryport."

"Um! If I give you his record, you'll of course keep it to yourself. You know how the department is about such things?"

"You are safe with me."

"I'll have the record brought in."

There was a wait of several minutes, and then a big book was produced from one of the safes.

"Here you are, Adams: John S. Watkins, Bryport. Born at New Haven, October 4, 1862. Former occupation, model maker and cabinet maker. Private detective for four years, and one year with the Cassell agency. Entered the United States service three years ago. Never been advanced. Cases 45,254; 47,732; 46,829. Wait till I see what those cases are."

Then three other records were brought forth and examined.

"Humph! all small affairs. No wonder he hasn't been promoted. The first is that of a young woman who used washed postage stamps. They found four dollars worth of washed stamps in her possession. The next is the arrest of a cigar dealer, who used stamped boxes more than once. He was a fellow sixty-eight years old and got two years. The last case is a mail-order swindle, a ten-cent puzzle, a small affair, run by a nineteen-year-old boy, and sentence was suspended."

"Not a very brilliant record," was Adams's comment. "It's a wonder he can hold his job."

"It is a wonder. But he may have political influence, or something else, or, it is barely possible that he may be doing some work that is not on record here. That is all I can tell you."

"What is his salary?"

"A thousand or twelve hundred a year."

"Not a very elaborate income. No wonder he would like to run down those counterfeiters. It would be a feather in his cap, eh?"

"Most assuredly. Do you expect to double up with him? Of course, it's none of my business and you needn't answer if you don't care to."

"I don't know what I'll do yet. This is a complication I want to study first."

"I see. Well, if we can help you——"

"I'll send word, don't fear. And if I do send word, I want you to act on the jump."

"Don't worry about that. I know if you send word it means business," answered the secret service officer, with a laugh.

An hour later found Adam Adams on a train bound for Bryport. He reached that city in the evening, and from a directory he learned where the secret service man resided. A street car brought him to within two blocks of the dwelling. It was a building of no mean pretentions and on a corner which looked to be valuable. Walking along the side street he saw that two domestics were at work in the kitchen and dining room.

"He certainly lives in style," mused Adam Adams. "Wonder if he manages it on twelve hundred a year?"

As it was a warm night the windows were open and by going close to the house he could hear the conversation being carried on by the servants as they moved back and forth between the two rooms.

From their talk, he learned that Mrs. Watkins and her two daughters were at Saratoga, and that it was expected that the husband would join his family there soon.

"And we'll have good times when he's gone, ain't that so, Caddie?" said one of the domestics.

"That we will," was the answer. "Better times than now, anyway, when you can't tell when he is coming in and when he is going out. It is a queer way he has with him lately."

"I guess he is worried over his money."

"Why, what do you know about that, Caddie Dix?"

"What do I know, Nellie Casey? Tim Corey told me Mrs. Watkins didn't git a cent of the old grandfather's money, although she said she did, and so did the master say so. It all went to the other part of the family."

"Then where did Mr. Watkins git his money, I'd like to know."

"Don't ask me. Tim says he is flush enough at the club and other places. The government must pay him more than most folks imagine."

"Is Tim goin' to the Rosebud's picnic?"

"Yes, and Dan's goin' too, and Dan wants me to bring you," went on one of the domestics, and then the talk drifted into a channel which was of no further interest to Adam Adams.

He rightfully surmised that John Watkins was not home and was somewhat puzzled to decide what he should do next. It was a long journey from Bryport to Sidham, and it was a question if he could accomplish anything at the scene of the tragedy during the night.

"Perhaps it will pay just as well to go to a hotel and go to bed," he told himself.

He had just come out to the corner of the street and was halting at the curb, when he saw two men approaching. One of the pair was John

Watkins, and the other was a heavy-set stranger, with bushy hair and a round, red nose and mutton-chop whiskers.

"Here we are, Styles," said John Watkins. "It's a little late, but I reckon the girls can fix us up something to eat. It's better than going to a restaurant."

"Anything will do me, if you've got a glass of ale to go with it," was the reply.

"Got to have a real Englishman's drink, eh?" said the secret service man, with a short laugh. "Well, I've remembered you and I can fix you up to the queen's taste. Come on inside." And then the pair entered the house.

CHAPTER XVII

AN INTERESTING CONVERSATION

ADAM ADAMS had watched the appearance and disappearance of the two men with interest. He remembered that Matlock Styles, the man who owed the Langmore estate $16,000 on three mortgages, was an Englishman, with mutton-chop whiskers. Evidently the man who had arrived with the secret service employee was the same individual.

This being so, the question at once arose, what had brought the pair together? Matlock Styles lived in an old colonial mansion, so Raymond Case had said, a mile and a half from the Langmore estate. Did his coming to Bryport have anything to do with the tragedy or with the counterfeits?

Going close to the house once more, he heard the two men enter the parlor and heard Watkins order supper. Then followed a conversation in such a low tone that he could only catch an occasional word. He heard something about mortgages and then a safe was mentioned, but he could not catch the direct connection. Evidently though, they were discussing the Langmore affair.

In a short while supper was served and the two men passed to the dining hall. Here, while the girls were near, they spoke of matters in general. The meal finished, John Watkins invited his visitor up to his den on the second floor.

As said before, the house was on a corner, and by the lighting up of a room above, Adam Adams located the den, just behind the main front corner room, and close to a tree, which grew along the side street. Looking around, the detective made certain that nobody was observing him, and then began to climb the tree with the agility of a schoolboy. One heavy branch ran out close to the building, and standing on this brought him to within three feet of the window, which was screened and open from the bottom to admit the air. The curtain was down to within three inches of the window sill, thus affording the detective a chance to peep into the apartment without running much risk of being discovered.

"Then you say the mortgages have not been paid?" came from John Watkins.

"No, blast the luck!" growled Matlock Styles. "I didn't think he wanted the cash so I let them run on."

"Have you any idea how the estate is to be divided?"

"I understand the girl gets half. The wife's half will go to her two sons now."

"That is lucky for them. I reckon Dick Ostrello can use all the money he can lay hands on. He's a wild one, if ever there was one."

"Don't Tom spend his money?"

"Not lately. I understand he is saving up to marry some girl in New York."

"Humph."

There was a pause, during which time both men lit cigars.

"How is the bloody business going?" asked Matlock Styles presently.

"Oh, I manage to earn my salary," answered the secret service man, with a dry laugh. "I don't get promoted though."

"You ought to try to unearth some big mystery. That would get your name in the papers."

"I don't want my name in the papers. I am doing well enough. Ain't I on the track of those counterfeits? What more do you want?"

"Yes, but you haven't got them yet, blast the luck! And you say you had the safe open?"

"I did."

"Then why didn't you look inside? I should have done so."

"I thought I'd get a better chance later on. But when I went back hang me if I could work the combination again."

"Have the safe makers opened the safe yet?"

"I think so, but if the counterfeits were found the local authorities haven't said a word. Somebody must be laying low."

There was another pause, and then Matlock Styles brought some papers from his pocket.

"You might glance over these bloody things while you have time," he observed. "Perhaps they'll give you a clue to work on. You see, I believe in helping a detective all I can," and he chuckled broadly.

As Adam Adams could see, the documents were of legal aspect and with them were several letters.

"Then the deal goes through," said John Watkins.

"Doesn't that look like it?"

"And the patent is yours?"

"Yes."

"I wonder what Barry Langmore would say to this, if he was alive?"

"He wouldn't like it at all."

"Do you think you can make any money out of the patent?"

"Money? I hope to make a fortune out of it."

"Say, Styles, you're a lucky dog and always were."

"It's because I watch my bloomin' chances," answered the Englishman. "By the way, were you at the inquest?"

"Sure."

"I didn't see you."

"No, but you spoke to me."

"I did? You're mistaken."

"Don't you remember the farmer who asked you for a chew of terbacker?"

"Was that you?" exclaimed Matlock Styles. "If it was you're improving. The first thing you know you'll be the real thing and getting a head position at Washington."

"I shouldn't mind that," answered John Watkins.

"Where are you going to-morrow?"

"To New York—to nose around."

"Want to locate the counterfeits?"

"I want to see if they have been reported. I've got a certain idea about them, but I am not sure if I am right."

"What's the idea?"

"That Langmore girl has engaged a detective named Adam Adams to clear her, if he can. He was dodging around the house when I was there, and somehow it's got into my head that he knows about the counterfeits."

"Does he belong to the secret service?"

"No, he's a private detective. I don't know much about him, but they say he's a pretty good one," continued John Watkins.

"You think he opened the safe?"

"I'm thinking that perhaps he was at the safe after I opened it. The safe is of a make in which the combination can be changed with ease. He could have looked into it and then have changed the numbers. I certainly didn't forget the old combination—it was so easy, four on forty, three on thirty and two on twenty—but that wouldn't open it when I went back."

"Can't you get in with him and find out what's what?" suggested Matlock Styles. "You can tell him that you are working up this case of the counterfeits."

"I may do that. The trouble is, these private detectives don't like to go in with an outsider—they are too much afraid of losing the credit for what they are trying to do."

"Is anybody else on the case?"

"Not that I know of. If there was——"

At that moment the door bell of the house rang and soon one of the girls came upstairs.

"Mr. Martin is below," said she to John Watkins.

"Is that so? Tell him I will see him in a minute." The secret service man turned to the Englishman. "He is a real estate man who is going to sell this house for me. I'd forgotten that I had an appointment with him."

"Never mind, give me that money you promised and I'll be going," answered Matlock Styles. "I've got a lot of things to attend to in the next few days."

"I'll give it to you in the library. The money is in the safe," was the answer, and then both of the men left the room.

Adam Adams descended to the ground and walked slowly to the front of the house. In a few minutes he saw the Englishman step out on the front piazza followed by the secret service man.

"Where are you going now?" asked the latter.

"Home and to bed," was the reply. "Good-night. Will I see you to-morrow?"

"Either to-morrow or the day after. I want to settle up this real estate deal. I promised my wife I'd do it."

The Englishman came away from the house and hurried along the street to where the trolley car ran. He boarded a car moving towards the depot and Adam Adams did the same. At the depot Matlock Styles took a train for home.

Adam Adams made his way to a hotel in a thoughtful mood. The conversation he had overheard interested him greatly. He decided to learn more concerning the pair, and especially Matlock Styles, without unnecessary delay.

CHAPTER XVIII

A GIRL'S RAVINGS

RAYMOND CASE passed a sleepless night watching over Margaret. The doctor called once more, as he had agreed, and left another soothing powder, which the nurse administered with difficulty. She shook her head when she came out of the sick room.

"What do you think?" questioned the young man pleadingly.

"To tell the truth, it looks like a bad case to me, Mr. Case," was the reply. "I may be mistaken, but I've had a pretty large hospital experience. She doesn't seem to respond to treatment as she should."

"Don't you think I ought to call in a specialist?"

Martha Sampson shrugged her shoulders. "That is for you to say. It wouldn't be proper for me to say anything against Doctor Bird."

"I'll send for a specialist at once," said Raymond, and hurried off to the nearest telephone station. He had some difficulty in getting the proper connection with New York, and then had to hold the wire until the specialist could be roused up. The expert's fee was large, but once guaranteed, he promised to come by the first train.

"He'll be here by seven o'clock," said the young man, on returning to the house.

"Will you let Doctor Bird know?"

"Yes, as soon as the specialist gets here. I want to be sure of my new man first."

It was six o'clock when Margaret roused up once more. Raymond was dozing in an armchair, the nurse having retired to get a short sleep. The young man was instantly at the sufferer's side.

All the color had left Margaret's face and she was deathly pale. Her eyes were as bright as stars and had a look in them that Raymond had never before seen.

"Are you better, Margaret?" he asked softly.

"I—I don't know," she answered slowly. "I—I feel very strange all over me."

"Perhaps you had better go to sleep again."

"No, I don't want to sleep any more, Raymond. I want to know something."

"What is it, dear?"

"Will they make me go to the funerals?" Her face began to show signs of worriment.

"You'll not have to go if you don't wish to," he answered, and gave a slight shiver in spite of himself, for the question was such an unexpected one.

"I can't go—I can't look at them! And then the crowd would stare so! Oh, Raymond, the crowd is the worst of all! Hundreds of eyes boring one through and through! I can't stand that!"

"You'll not have to stand that, Margaret. But go to sleep, do! It will do you a world of good," and he smoothed down her hair fondly.

"No, I've slept enough—I want to talk. Oh, I am not afraid to talk now," she added, sitting up. "I thought it all out while I was sleeping. Isn't it funny that one can think a thing out in one's sleep? And it's so very clear now—as clear as crystal—and it was so dark and muddled before. Will they give me a trial?"

He started in spite of himself. "Please don't think of that now, Margaret, I beg of you. Lie down and try to sleep. I have sent for another doctor, a specialist. He will be here soon."

"A specialist? How can he help me? You hired that Mr. Adam Adams but he has deserted me. But then—but then—he must have learned the truth!" She gave a sob and buried her face in her hands. "Yes, he must have learned the truth!"

"Margaret, do keep quiet, please!" he pleaded. "You need rest, you must have rest."

"No, I want to talk, to tell you something, Raymond. I—I want you to go away."

"Away? Oh, Margaret!"

"Yes, away—you mustn't come near me any more. You are innocent and it isn't right that you should suffer with me. You must go away and forget me."

"I'll never do that. You mustn't even dream of such a thing. We are going to get you well, and we are going to prove your innocence to the world."

"My innocence? Oh, Raymond, don't speak so—it cuts me like a knife!"

"But I mean it," he said firmly.

"Yes, yes, I know—you are so good-hearted, so true! But haven't I told you? Must I go over it again? The ring, the blood——"

"Margaret!"

"And that note, and the quarrels, and all. Didn't they prove that I was guilty? Yes, they proved it, and I must—must—— Will they hang me or electrocute me? I wonder how it feels to be hung or electrocuted?" She gave a hollow, bitter laugh. "I'll soon know, I suppose!" And then she fell back on her pillow exhausted.

The nurse had been aroused by the talking and stood in the doorway. She gazed questioningly at the young man.

"Did you wake her up?"

"No, she roused up and insisted upon talking."

"She ought to be kept quiet. I'll give her another powder."

"Had you not better wait until the specialist arrives?"

"Well, we can do that—if he isn't delayed too long."

After that the time dragged heavily. Just before train time Raymond took a coach to the depot and there met the specialist and told his story as the pair were driven rapidly to the house.

"It is a purely nervous shock, undoubtedly," said the specialist. "I will first find out from the nurse what the other doctor has given her."

He was soon in consultation with Martha Sampson. In the midst of this Doctor Bird arrived. The local physician was willing enough to transfer the case to new hands.

"I am of the opinion that she is guilty," he said in private to the specialist. "Mr. Case, of course, thinks differently. You can figure it out to suit yourself," and he told exactly what he had done and then went away, not to return.

Doctor Fanning watched at the sufferer's side for over an hour, before Margaret roused up again. The girl was very weak and spoke disconnectedly, but always in the same strain. She went over the scene at the inquest several times, and spoke of the blood on the engagement ring, as if that was the crown of her misfortunes. Then she sat up suddenly and looked at the new doctor.

"Are you the judge?" she demanded. "If you are I will tell you all. I am guilty—they proved it! I am guilty! guilty! guilty!" she repeated the words over and over again, until she fell back on the pillow as before. Then she became delirious and it took both the nurse and Raymond to hold her. The doctor speedily opened up his case of medicines and gave her a hypodermic injection in the forearm. Then he made an examination of the patient, lasting some time.

"I will be plain with you, Mr. Case," he said, drawing the young man to another room. "This is a serious matter—a very serious matter indeed. I believe you think the young lady innocent of the crime of which she is accused?"

"I am willing to stake my life on it. She is raving now, that is all."

"Um!" The specialist nodded slowly and thoughtfully. "Well then, we can only hope for the best. I had better stay with her, at least to-day and to-morrow—there may be another turn to her condition shortly."

"Do your best, doctor. I am willing to foot the bill, no matter what it is."

"If I was certain she was innocent——"

"I am certain of it."

"You have the proofs?"

"No, not that. But——"

"I understand your situation, Mr. Case, and I honor you for the stand you have taken. At the same time I feel it my duty to tell you something. It is about a case that came under my notice three years ago. An old man was murdered and his wife was suspected of the crime. She declared that she was innocent and many believed her. But soon the evidence began to accumulate against her and she had the same kind of a shock that Miss Langmore has experienced. She raved and at last cried out that she was guilty——"

"And was she guilty?"

"It was never proven, although matters looked black against her. The case hung fire because the old woman kept growing worse. The doctors who were in attendance did all that medical science could suggest to bring the old woman out of her peculiar state. But it was of no avail."

"And the end, doctor, the end?" questioned the young man eagerly.

"It's a sorry thing to tell you, but it is best to be warned. The old woman went mad and while in that condition she one night committed suicide by leaping out of a window. It is a sad case but it may act as a warning. Someone must be on hand to watch Miss Langmore constantly."

A long conversation followed, and the specialist gave minute direction to the nurse, who promised to get another nurse to relieve her. Then the medical man mixed up several drugs and placed the mixture in a glass with some water.

The talk left Raymond in low spirits and the young man walked up and down in the parlor below in a thoughtful mood. The outlook was certainly gloomy enough. What if the shock should prove so severe that Margaret would never get over it? In that case it would matter little even if her innocence was established.

In the midst of his meditations he saw a man come up on the porch and he opened the door to admit Adam Adams and ushered the detective in the parlor.

"I understand Miss Langmore was brought here," said Adam Adams, dropping into a chair.

"Yes," and Raymond told his story. "We looked for you at the trial," he added.

"I had other things to do, Mr. Case, and I read the most of the testimony in the newspapers. But I am sorry to learn that Miss Langmore is in this condition and I trust the specialist pulls her through in good shape."

"Yes, yes, so do I. But we must clear her, Mr. Adams—it must be done."

"I said I would do my best. But this is going to be no ordinary mystery to unravel. It is deeper than most folks suspect. A deep motive was the cause of the double murder—a motive I hope to unearth before I am through."

"Unless the mystery is speedily cleared up I am afraid Miss Langmore will go raving mad, and the specialist is afraid so, too."

"Yes, such things have happened before—the mental strain is too great for sensitive nerves to bear. So I must lose no time. Now to come to business. I want you to tell me all you can about Mr. Langmore's life and his business dealings with people in this vicinity."

CHAPTER XIX

ADAM ADAMS MAKES A NEW MOVE

IT WAS not until an hour later that Adam Adams left Martha Sampson's cottage. He had gained from Raymond all the information he could and also the names and addresses of half a dozen people he thought to interview. He spent what was left of the forenoon in the town, calling at the bank, and on a lawyer and one of the merchants, and about three o'clock in the afternoon made his way once more to the vicinity of the Langmore mansion. Here, to his surprise, he ran into Charles Vapp.

"Is your man around here?" he asked, as the pair met in the shadow of some bushes.

"Yes, went into the house five minutes ago."

"Have you learned anything unusual?"

"Not much. He has been around arranging his business affairs and he met Miss Bernard and the two had a confidential talk, but I couldn't get close enough to hear what was said. After that he came out to Sidham and there met a man named Matlock Styles."

"Go on."

"The two had a long talk, and Ostrello seemed to be angry about something. Then this Styles seemed to threaten Ostrello and the young man seemed to lose all his nerve and wilt. I never saw a fellow change so. 'You can't do it!' I heard him say and Styles answered: 'I can and I will, if you try to interfere with my business.' Then they talked in a low tone and Styles went off in a buggy, saying he was going home. Ostrello walked up the street and down again, as if he didn't know what to do. At last he hired a rig and came out here. He went into the house and I was just going to change my disguise and take a look around when you came up."

"I see. Well, Vapp, if he meets this Styles again you do your level best to hear what is said."

"I did it before, but they kept in a corner of a building and I couldn't get near without atracting their attention. I tried it once but both of them gave me such a suspicious look I had to move on."

"That's all?"

"He sent three letters and a telegram. The telegram was to the firm he works for, something about an order for quinine pills—I heard it clicked off at the telegraph office."

"Well, you can stay here and I'll go into the house. If he comes out you follow him," said Adam Adams.

The detective found the mansion in charge of the policeman and Mrs. Morse. Both looked at him questioningly as he entered.

"Nothing is to be touched," said the policeman. "Them's orders from headquarters."

"Is anybody here?"

"Mrs. Morse and myself, that's all."

"No visitors at all?"

"No, sir."

"That's queer. Haven't seen anything of Mrs. Langmore's son to-day?"

The policeman shook his head. "You haven't seen him, have you?" he asked of the woman.

"No, and I don't want to see him," she answered tartly. "I don't want anybody to bother me," and she looked directly at the detective.

"I shan't bother you," was the quick reply. "But as I am working on behalf of Miss Langmore, and as this was her father's house and the one in which she lived, I think I shall take a look around," he went on, in a slightly stiffer voice.

"But orders——" began the policeman.

"You may go around with me, so that you can be sure I do not touch anything."

"Well, I dunno——" began the bluecoat.

His speech was cut short by the banging of a rear door, as the wind caught it. Mrs. Morse gave a cry.

"What was that? I didn't leave any door open!"

She ran to the rear of the mansion and the policeman followed. Adam Adams stepped to the front door and then out on the lawn. He was in time to see a man leap a side fence and start down the road. A moment later Charles Vapp was following the disappearing individual. The detective stepped into the house again.

"Well, that's mighty queer," muttered the policeman, as he came back.

"It is queer," answered Adam Adams, eying him sternly. "You had better explain it if you want to keep out of trouble."

"Explain what?" came from Mrs. Morse.

"You just told me that nobody was in the house."

"Well?"

"A man just left by the back door and ran away. Either you knew he was here or else you are not taking proper care of these premises."

"Why, sir——" began the woman, but then her eyes dropped before the steady gaze of the detective. "I—that is——"

"Who was that man? Come, answer me

truthfully, or I shall report this, and let me say, my word will carry great weight."

"Oh, well, if you must know, it was Mr. Ostrello, Mrs. Langmore's son. He wanted—er—some books he left here some time ago. I don't know why he left in such a hurry. Perhaps because he didn't wish to meet you."

"Then you admit you lied to me, do you?"

At this the woman broke down completely and began to cry. "I didn't want to do any wrong, sir. He said he wanted to get the books and he didn't want every Tom, Dick and Harry to know he was here—those are his own words. He's a very nice gentleman, and so—so—I said what I did."

"You let him go through the house?"

"He had that right. It was his mother's home, wasn't it?"

"Yet you didn't want me to go through."

"A relative is different."

"Nevertheless, I think I'll take a look around, now he has gone," returned Adam Adams.

To this the woman felt she could no longer object and the policeman merely shrugged his shoulders. From the pair the detective learned that the safe had been opened by an expert in the presence of the coroner and chief of police, who had then had the combination set to suit themselves.

A tour of the mansion brought nothing new to light and Adam Adams left by the back way and walked down to the brook. Then he leaped the stream and took to a narrow path leading through the woods beyond. Deep in the woods he paused, to make several changes in his appearance, putting on a light wig and blue goggles and also an old-fashioned collar and necktie. Then he rubbed a little brown powder on his hands and face, rendering his complexion several shades darker than ordinary.

From a map of the county he had studied the surrounding roads thoroughly, and soon came out on a highway leading to Matlock Styles' residence. He was more than ever interested in the Englishman and wondered what John Watkins, Tom Ostrello and Styles might have in common.

In the distance he presently beheld a house he knew must be the Styles place. There was a turn in the road and instead of going up to the house by the front way the detective leaped a fence and passed through a wheatfield. Beyond this, and quite close to the house and the outbuildings, was a field planted with corn, between the rows of which were pumpkins and squashes.

He had hoped to gain the vicinity of the residence without being observed, as it was now growing darker, but he was not yet halfway through the cornfield when the deep baying of a mastiff burst upon his ear, coming nearer and nearer.

"Hullo! this is something I didn't bargain for," he muttered. He did not wish to shoot a valuable dog and at the same time he did not intend to run the risk of being bitten and perhaps torn to pieces.

He halted and drew his pistol, and a second later the dog burst into view. He was a full-blooded mastiff and a magnificent creature in every way. He came to a halt and showed his teeth, and presently his mate also appeared.

"Back there!" cried the detective. "Back, I say!" But the dogs only came closer, baying loudly and eying him in anything but a friendly fashion.

"Hi, there, Nelson!" came a voice from the other side of the cornfield. "Hi, Queen, what's the matter?"

"Call off your dogs, unless you want me to shoot them!" exclaimed Adam Adams.

"Blast you, don't you shoot my dogs," was the answer, and in a moment more Matlock Styles put in an appearance. He carried a dog-whip and motioned the animals away. "Back, Nelson, you bloody brute! Back, Queen!" And both animals slunk to his rear.

"Thanks! I am glad you came," said Adam Adams, and slipped his pistol back into his pocket.

"Are you?" sneered the Englishman. "If you had killed one of those dogs you would have gotten into a mess, I can warrant. They are worth a hundred pounds—five hundred dollars—each."

"Great smoke! I'm glad I didn't touch 'em, sir. I couldn't pay for one leg," and the detective grinned.

"What are you doing in this field?"

"I thought I'd take a short-cut to the Knoxbury road. It's getting late and I want to get back to the tavern there."

"The Knoxbury road? Why, man, you're a good three miles out of your bloomin' way. The Knoxbury road isn't this way—it's over there," and Matlock Styles pointed with his whip.

"Is that so? Then I'm twisted. Too bad! I'm so dog tired I can't walk much further either."

"Been taking a constitutional?"

"That and I walked over to look at the place where that double murder took place. Awful crime that, eh? Made me shiver just to look at the house. I suppose you've heard about it?"

"Yes, everybody knows about it around here."

"They say the man's daughter did it."

"If she did, they ought to string her up for it," growled Matlock Styles. "Such a blasted, cold-blooded crime as that was. Was you to the inquest?"

"No."

"Our coroner got her to rights. He's a sharp one."

While the two were talking they were walking towards the house, which was a pretentious affair but closed up on one side. They halted near a side porch.

"If I am three or four miles from the Knoxbury road I'd like to get something to eat and rest a bit before I start out again," said the detective. "Could you supply me with a bite? I'm willing to pay whatever's fair."

"I fancy so," answered the Englishman, after a slight hesitation, during which he eyed Adam Adams keenly. "Polly!" he called, and an old woman, with a wrinkled face and a tangle of gray hair appeared, holding a cup in one hand and a towel in the other.

"What are ye wantin' now, Mat?" she croaked.

"Here's a gentleman has lost his way. He wants a bite to eat before he starts again. Fix him up some sandwiches and some milk, and whatever else you have handy that's good. Where is Paul?"

"Gone to town."

"And Fred?"

"Gone to see the Garrison girl."

The woman disappeared from view, and a moment later Matlock Styles and Adam Adams entered the dining room of the abode.

CHAPTER XX

A QUEER TURN OF AFFAIRS

THE detective felt that he was on delicate as well as dangerous ground. Nothing had been said to arouse his suspicions but he could feel by instinct that the Englishman was growing distrustful of him.

"Take off your coat, it's bloomin' warm in here," said Matlock Styles, as he proceeded to shed his outer garment.

"Thanks, but I'd just as soon keep my coat on," was the answer. "I am used to it. Fine farm you have here."

"Pretty fair."

"Raise much grain?"

"Only for the stock. I deal mostly in horses and in fancy dogs."

"I used to own a fancy dog myself," said Adam Adams smoothly and mentioned the fine points. The Englishman seemed to warm up to this subject and spoke of the many dogs he had, and of the prices some had brought him. In the midst of the conversation a lunch was brought in and the detective sat down to eat. Then with great care Adam Adams brought the talk around once more to the Langmore tragedy. But Matlock Styles at once grew cold.

"The girl did it," he reaffirmed. "They have her cornered. It won't be possible for her to clear herself, even with the best lawyers in the country."

"Do they suspect anybody else?"

"I think not. By the way, did you say you were at the house?"

"Oh, I walked around the place, that's all. I saw a policeman on guard there."

"Anybody else?"

"No."

"Did you come across the stream?" asked the Englishman quickly.

"Yes. I thought it was a short cut, but I got left."

"You came right from the brook to my place?"

"Well, not exactly. I got tangled up in the woods before I got on the path that brought me here."

"See anything strange around the Langmore house—any tracks or anything like that?"

"Why do you ask that? I thought you were sure Miss Langmore was guilty."

"So I am, but a fellow makes some bloomin' mistakes sometimes. I am not interested very much though," continued Matlock Styles, and gave a yawn.

"I saw nothing out of the ordinary. There were a good many footprints."

"Running this way?"

"Running every way, I thought. What kind of a man was this Barry Langmore?"

"A fairly good sort. He wanted everything that was coming to him, and so did his wife. She was a tartar and so was the girl. I shouldn't have wanted to live in the house with them."

At that moment another man appeared at the doorway.

"Hullo! got company?" he called out.

"Not exactly, Bart," answered Matlock Styles. "Excuse me for a moment," he continued, to the detective, and passed out of the room and to the kitchen with the newcomer.

He was gone for several minutes and during that time Adam Adams finished his lunch and took a good look at the room he occupied. There was nothing unusual about the apartment and his survey was finished before the Englishman returned.

"Now I think I'll pay you and be on my way," said Adam Adams, rising. There seemed to be no excuse for his lingering longer. "How much do I owe you?"

"Not a blasted farthing."

"Then I am much obliged. Will you have a smoke?" and Adam Adams handed forth a couple of choice Havana cigars.

"I don't know as I care to smoke, Mr. —— You didn't give me your name."

"Robert Dixon. And yours?"

"Matlock Styles. I don't care to smoke. Bart!"

At the call the other man came in from the kitchen. To his surprise Adam Adams saw that he carried a rope in one hand and a pistol in the other. He was followed by the mastiff Nelson.

"Don't you dare to stir, you bloody rascal!" went on Matlock Styles to the detective.

"Why, what's the matter now?" queried Adam Adams. The turn of affairs puzzled him not a little.

"You'll soon see what's the matter," said the man called Bart.

"I must say I don't understand you."

"Maybe you'll understand when you are a prisoner," put in Matlock Styles.

"A prisoner? What for?"

"You know well enough."

"I am entirely in the dark. See here, is this a hold-up?"

"Yes, for we are going to hold you up, you bloody villain," said the Englishman, with a chuckle. "Don't dare to resist, or it will be the worse for you," and he drew a pistol from his pocket.

"But what does it mean?"

"It means that I have found you out. You are the murderer of Mr. and Mrs. Langmore."

"What!"

For the instant Adam Adams was truly surprised. It was such a turn of affairs as he had not anticipated. He looked at Matlock Styles keenly. Could the Englishman really mean what he said? He certainly appeared sincere enough.

"You have made a great mistake, sir," said the detective. "I know nothing more of the murders than I have already related."

"I think differently, my fine fellow."

"What makes you imagine I am guilty?"

"Never mind that now."

"Why, I can prove an *alibi.*"

"Then you'll have to prove it, and a bloody strong one too, before I let you go. I've seen you sneaking around before. That's a wig you are wearing. Bart, bind him, and do it bloomin' tight, too."

"I'll do it tight enough," answered the other man, pocketing his pistol. "Hold out your hands," he went on to the detective.

Adam Adams looked around to see if there was some means of escape. But he realized that between the two men and the somewhat savage mastiff he was squarely cornered.

"I suppose I'll have to submit," he said. "But let me tell you that you are making a big mistake and it will cost you dear if you make me submit to this indignity. I'll sue you for a good round sum."

At this Matlock Styles winced. Evidently he was one who did not like to have his pocketbook touched. But then he stiffened again.

"I am willing to run the risk. Go ahead, Bart."

Adam Adams was compelled to hold out his hands and to his astonishment, not to say chagrin, his arms and also his legs were tightly bound.

"Going to search him?" asked the fellow called Bart.

"Of course," answered Matlock Styles and went through the detective's pockets one after the other. Fortunately Adam Adams had but little with him outside of a roll of bankbills and the material for several disguises. Matlock Styles allowed him to keep his money but placed the disguises on the table.

"That looks as if you were an honest man," said he with a sneer. "Honest men don't go around in this fashion. You're the man, beyond a bloody doubt, and I am going to hand you over to the police. Nelson!"

At the call the mastiff came up and looked inquiringly at his master.

"Sit down in that chair," continued the Englishman to Adam Adams, shoving him backward on a seat. "Now, Nelson, watch him. Watch him, old boy. Don't let him get up." And the dog growled in response.

The Englishman then motioned to the other man, and the pair went out together, closing the door after them. Listening, the detective heard a murmur of voices in the kitchen of the house and then all became quiet.

Adam Adams was angry, and that anger was directed entirely at himself. In the easiest possible manner he had allowed himself to be outwitted and exposed.

Could the Englishman be honest in what he said, or was he playing a deep game? That was a question which could not as yet be answered. If the fellow was honest he was most likelv now getting ready to take his prisoner to the Sidham lockup. The absurdity of such a move compelled Adam Adams to smile bitterly.

To escape was out of the question. He could not slip from the cords which bound him, and at his slightest move the mastiff growled and showed an inclination to leap at his throat. So the detective considered discretion the better part of valor and remained quiet.

It was fully an hour before Matlock Styles returned. He was alone and carried a lantern on his arm, for it was now dark outside.

"I can't take you to town to-night," he said. "I am going to keep you here until morning."

"You haven't any right to keep me at all."

"I'll risk that. I'll make you comfortable, don't you fear."

Adam Adams thought rapidly. Perhaps to remain a prisoner at the farmhouse would be better than to be taken to town. During the night he might get the opportunity to escape.

Matlock Styles untied the end of the rope which bound the detective's legs and ordered the prisoner to follow him.

"And don't try to run away, unless you want Nelson to make a meal of you," he added grimly.

"Where are you going to take me?"

"You'll soon see."

The Englishman led the way out of the farmhouse and past the barn and several other outbuildings. Then he took to a path leading to the river and presently came to a halt in front of an old deserted mill. The building was dark and forbidding, and an owl, hooting in a nearby tree, added to the loneliness of the situation.

"I don't understand this," said the detective, as Matlock Styles came to a halt.

The Englishman did not answer. Instead, he set down his lantern and proceeded to bind the detective's legs once more. His manner was now rough and he acted as if he was somewhat desperate. He shoved open a door to the mill and peered around inside. Then he stepped back, put his lantern over his arm and caught Adam Adams up by the middle and threw the detective over his shoulder as if his prisoner were a log of wood.

There was no use arguing and Adam Adams did not attempt it. Indeed, he was rather curious to see what the fellow would do next. Matlock Styles entered the old mill and then descended a flight of stone steps. Below was a sort of cellar, damp and musty. Crossing the cellar the Englishman opened an iron door in a brick wall and literally threw Adam Adams into the inky darkness beyond.

"Now stay there until I get ready to take you to jail," cried the man.

He banged the heavy iron door shut and bolted it. The next instant the detective heard him cross the cellar. He mounted the stairs, banged the door above; and all became quiet.

CHAPTER XXI

CLOSE TO DEATH

For several seconds after being forced into the darkness beyond the iron door Adam Adams stood perfectly still. He heard Matlock Styles go upstairs and was fairly well satisfied that the Englishman had left the old mill.

"That man has something up his sleeve as sure as fate," murmured the detective to himself. "He is playing a game, and a deep one, too."

The darkness was absolute, and although he strained his eyes to the utmost he could not see a single thing surrounding him. To all appearances he was in a veritable dungeon.

He sat down on the cement floor, and bending forward, managed, after much labor, to loosen the rope around his legs with his teeth. Then he began to twist and turn at the rope which held his arms and presently that also came away. His efforts lacerated his wrists and ankles, but to the pain he paid no attention.

With caution he moved around until his hands came in contact with a stone wall. He paused for a moment and then moved along the wall, feeling carefully, so that he might not miss any opening which might present itself, and keeping one hand in front of him, so that he might not run into anything.

The wall was smooth and apparently solid. Suddenly he put out his foot and stepped upon nothing but air. He tried to draw back, but it was too late, and with a cry that could not be suppressed he went down into pitch-black space. He struck on some sharp rocks, and then his senses forsook him.

The fall was a perilous one and it was only by good luck that Adam Adams did not have his brains dashed out. As it was he remained unconscious for fully half an hour, and came to his senses to find a large lump on his head and the blood flowing over his face. His left shoulder was lame and for the time being he was afraid it was broken.

The rocks upon which he had fallen rested in several inches of water, and with this water he washed off the blood and bathed his hurts as best he could in the darkness.

The mishap made him reach but one conclusion. Matlock Styles had placed him there so that he might injure if not kill himself!

"The rascal!" muttered the detective. "If I ever get out of here he shall suffer for this if for nothing else!"

It took him some time to pull himself together and get his breath. Then he felt around cautiously, being careful to take no more steps until he was sure of his footing.

In a quarter of an hour he knew he was a prisoner in a circular cistern perhaps twelve feet in diameter and of uncertain depth. The walls were perpendicular, smooth and covered with slime, so to crawl up was totally out of the question.

"A pretty fix to be in," he mused. "If Styles had wanted to kill and bury me he couldn't have started out better. Ha! What's that?" He listened and then smiled grimly to himself. "Rats. I suppose there are scores of them around this place. I must see to it that they don't get a chance to feed upon my body!"

What was the best way to get out? For some minutes the detective studied the situation. In one of his pockets he had stuffed the rope taken from his legs, thinking it might come in handy in some way. He made a small loop at one end of this rope and threw it upward a dozen times or more. At last it caught on something and held fast.

Being on guard, in case he might fall backward, Adam Adams pulled himself up on the rope. It had caught on a sharp stone close to the top of the cistern and with an effort he drew himself to the flooring above.

"Thank Heaven for that," he murmured. "I must steer clear of such pitfalls in the future. If only I had a light!"

But his pocket light as well as his pistol had been taken from him. Whatever was to be done, must be accomplished in the darkness, and once more he set out on his tour of exploration, but this time with added caution.

It was not long before he found a place where the cellar sloped downward. At the end was a semi-circular opening, not unlike a huge drain.

"I'll follow this and see where it leads to," he told himself, and went ahead a distance of thirty feet, when he found himself wading into water that was fairly clean and sweet.

"I must be close to the river now," he reasoned. "I wonder if I can swim out to the stream?"

He hesitated for a minute and then resolved to make a dive for liberty. Down he went into the water and plunged along until he was over his head. Then he struck out as well as circumstances permitted. It was a truly perilous thing to attempt, but the detective was on his mettle and desperate.

Twenty feet were passed and then the force of the water seemed to drive him upward. There was now no turning back, and holding his breath with difficulty, he swam on and on, rising steadily until his head struck an iron obstruction. He put up his hands and found that it was a grating. Opening his eyes he made out that the grating was less than three inches from the surface of the river. Beyond he could see the open sky and the stars shining brightly.

With might and main he tried to push the grating aside. It refused to budge, and he grew frantic, for his breath was fast leaving him. It looked as if he would be drowned like a rat in a trap.

Desperately and with all of his remaining strength he threw himself at the grating. It bent at one end and came loose. Then he made another attack and the grating dropped to one side and his body shot upward to the surface of the river, out into the life-giving air. He gasped, spluttered, almost tumbled down again, and then staggered to the shore, which was close at hand. He had been under water less than three minutes, yet the time had seemed an age.

He sat on the grassy bank for a long time, trying to get back his strength and wondering what he had best do next. All was silent around him, saving for the hooting of some owls and the occasional far-off cry of a whip-poor-will. He gazed around, but not a light was in sight. The old mill was beyond him, partly screened by a number of trees.

Should he return to the vicinity of Matlock Styles' house and set a watch? This he thought a good idea, but there were two objections. He was wet to the skin and wanted some dry clothes, and he did not relish running into one or more of the Englishman's savage dogs, when he had nothing with which to defend himself.

As he sat there meditating, a stream of light shot across his feet and then disappeared. It had come from an upper window of the old mill and he scrambled to his feet to see what it meant. In a moment more he saw another stream of light and then a curious white cloud floated up from another window of the mill. At the same time he heard loud groans and then a hoarse note coming from what appeared to him to be a fog horn. The groans and the white vapor lasted for several minutes and then died away together.

It was a most uncanny happening and made his heart beat a little quicker than was its usual habit.

Then of a sudden his face brightened and he smiled to himself.

"Make-believe ghosts and nothing more," he mused. "I wonder who is trying to scare folks away from the old mill? Most likely it is this Matlock Styles and it is part of another game of his. He must have gotten his idea from the old miser in the 'Chimes of Normandy,' only he works his ghostship a little differently."

He was about to move forward when a sound reached his ears which caused him to pause. A dog was approaching—one of the mastiffs he had met before. The animal growled ominously and would have attacked Adam Adams had not the detective leaped into the water and begun to swim away. The dog halted on the edge of the bank, and then there seemed nothing for the detective to do but to swim to the other side of the river, which he did, and then disappeared into the bushes.

"I think this investigation will keep—at least for to-night," he reasoned. "I may as well get back to town, get some dry clothes, and go to bed."

His adventures had tired him and he was thoroughly exhausted by the time he reached the Beechwood Hotel. Here he explained that he had slipped into the river and readily obtained some dry garments, after which he went to bed, sleeping soundly until sunrise.

He obtained an early and substantial breakfast and then visited a clothing establishment for another suit of clothing and a hat. From the clothing store he stepped into a drug shop, purchasing a number of chemicals and also an atomizer. Then he visited a barber shop and got a close hair cut.

At the post-office he received a letter, dropped by Charles Vapp the evening before. It was short and to the point:

"The man is keeping me on the jump. He went to see Matlock Styles and Styles threatened him with something again and Ostrello was greatly disturbed. After that Ostrello sent a money-order to his brother Dick for fifty dollars. He is now going to New York again and I shall follow."

This communication set Adam Adams to thinking once more. That Tom Ostrello and Matlock Styles had something in common there could be no doubt. The question was, What?

As the detective was walking back to the hotel he saw Raymond Case approaching and went to meet the young man.

"Oh, Mr. Adams, I am glad to meet you," cried Raymond. "Have you learned anything new?"

"A little but not a great deal. How is Miss Langmore this morning?"

Raymond drew a long sigh.

"I do not think she is much better. She is more quiet, but——"

"She is not clear in her mind?"

"That's it. She is now thoroughly convinced that she is guilty."

"And you do not believe her?"

"Of course not. I know she is innocent. Come now, honestly, don't you think so yourself?"

"I do."

"I knew it!" The young man's face brightened for an instant.

"But it is going to be no easy thing to prove," pursued the detective. "This crime was no simple matter. I am certain it was carefully planned and just as carefully executed. Those who committed it made it look as simple as possible for a purpose."

"And you are on the track?"

"I am on several tracks. I am not sure of the right one yet."

"Do you think those counterfeits had anything to do with the crime?"

"Undoubtedly. You say Miss Langmore seems to be resting easier?"

"Slightly."

"If it would not hurt, I should like to have a few words with her."

"Then come along and we can ask the specialist I have called in from New York."

Placing his purchases in the room at the hotel, Adam Adams accompanied Raymond to Martha Sampson's residence. They found the nurse and the doctor discussing the case, and the detective was introduced and he mentioned the object of his visit.

"It will do no harm to speak to Miss Langmore so long as you do not excite her," said the specialist. "But do not dwell on the subject of the murder too long."

"I shall not mention the murder," was the reply.

When Adam Adams entered the sick room he found Margaret sitting up in bed with several pillows behind her head. She gazed at him in perplexity and then gave a slight shiver.

"You—you have come to take me to prison," she cried.

"Not at all, Miss Langmore," he answered, dropping into a chair by her side. "You shall never go to prison if I can prevent it. But I came to see you about something else. Do you feel a bit stronger?"

"No, I feel very weak. What do you want to see me about, if not about the——"

"Oh, I want to ask you about some of the men with whom your father did business."

"Didn't you ask me that before?"

"Perhaps I did. But I want you to give me all the information you possibly can."

"I will."

"In the first place, you know Matlock Styles."

"Why, yes, I know him fairly well."

"He had some business dealings with your father."

"Yes, he owed my father money on several mortgages."

"Did they have any other business relations?"

"I think Mr. Styles had some interest in one of my father's patents—or, at least he claimed an interest. He and my father had some differences of opinion in the matter."

"Was the patent matter settled up?"

"I do not know, but I do not think so."

"Can you tell me anything else about Mr. Styles?"

The girl hesitated and then a flush mounted to her face. "Yes, I can. I—I did not wish to speak of it before, yet I see no harm in doing so. About four months ago Mr. Styles asked me to marry him. I told him I could not do so. He was very persistent and said he had more money than I imagined. I told him that that would make no difference, that I did not love him and did not wish him to mention the matter again."

"How did he take your refusal?"

"He was very bitter and overbearing. He said I had better think it over, and he hinted something about having my father in his power. He did not say it in just so many words but he hinted at it."

"Did he mean about the patent?"

"No, I think it was something else. But I did not pay much attention, for I thought he was talking merely to get me to consider his suit, and I did not wish to consider it, for I had become acquainted with Raymond."

"Did he ever bother you after that?"

"Only once, when I met him on the road. Then he asked me again, and said I'd be sorry some day if I refused him."

"Humph!" Adam Adams mused for a moment. "Now to change the subject. When did Matlock Styles last call on your father?"

"He called several times last week. I don't know exactly when he called last. But I do know that my father was greatly excited over something, and that he called in my stepmother and she was excited, too. I was not told what it was about."

"Well, to drop him, do you know a man named John Watkins, of Bryport?"

"Watkins? Yes, I do. He once called on my father, about the same time that Mr. Styles called last."

"Do you know why he called?"

"I do not. I thought it was about a patent. I learned that Mr. Watkins worked for the United States government and I thought it was for the patent office."

"Then that is all, Miss Langmore." The detective arose and held out his hand. "Now take good care of yourself and do not worry. Matters are bound to come out right in the end."

"But how can they be better for me?" Margaret's face took on its worried look again. "They have proved that I am guilty."

"You are not guilty," said Adam Adams firmly and looking her squarely in the eyes. "You are not guilty. I say so, and I know. Do not worry. Rest quietly, and soon everything shall be made plain to you." And then before she could answer he was gone. She sank back among the pillows, closed her eyes and heaved a sigh.

"It cannot be!" she murmured. "It is too late! I am guilty! I am guilty!"

CHAPTER XXII

AN UNDERGROUND MYSTERY

LATE that afternoon a burly negro, plainly dressed and wearing a slouch hat, made his way along the river road in the direction of the old mill. He kept as much as possible in the shade of the bushes and trees and when close to the mill sank low in the tall grass, that he might not be seen by anyone who was passing.

The negro was Adam Adams and his disguise was perfection itself. The detective was heavily armed and carried in his pockets several things which were unusual to him.

He waited around the old mill until the sun went down and the stars began to come out one by one. No one was in sight, but this did not ruffle him. He was ready to play a waiting game and take whatever was to come, even at the risk of his life.

Presently he heard a whistle at a distance. Then a man appeared whom he rightfully took to be the fellow called Bart. This individual passed up and down the road near the mill and also came down to the water's edge, to gaze at the footpath on the other side of the river. The man had the mastiff Queen with him and the dog came within a hundred feet of where Adam Adams was in hiding. Quickly the detective pulled a large atomizer from his pocket. Then, as the man walked back to the Styles' farmhouse, the dog turned and disappeared in the bushes as if following a trail.

"Don't come here, old lady," muttered the detective, as he stood on guard, with the atomizer ready for use. "If you do you'll be sorry."

The mastiff was following Adam Adams' trail and in a minute more she came up and set up a fierce growl. Then she made a savage leap forward.

The detective might have finished her with a shot from his pistol, for he was an expert marksman. But he had come prepared to strike a blow without making any noise. As the mastiff sprang at him, he held the atomizer at full length and let a portion of the contents fly full into the animal's face. There was a snarl and a gasp and the magnificent canine fell over on her side. Leaping forward, the detective held the atomizer at the dog's nostrils and used it vigorously for a few seconds. It was more than sufficient for his purpose and soon the animal stiffened out in death.

"It's a shame to kill so fine a brute, but it can't be helped," he muttered as he restored the atomizer to his pocket. He had used a mixture of chloroform, carbolic acid and other drugs, and the dog had been blinded as well as smothered by the application.

He left the mastiff where she had fallen and, as the darkness increased, drew closer to the mill. Then he saw a man approaching and recognized Matlock Styles. The Englishman entered the old mill, closing the door carefully behind him.

"More ghost work, I suppose," murmured the detective, but he was mistaken, no such manifestations occurring. Evidently they were to take place later.

Without making a sound he crawled up to a side door of the old mill. It was unfastened, and pushing it open, he entered the lower floor of the building. All was silent.

He waited and after awhile heard a step overhead and a low murmur of voices. Then a man came down a narrow stairs, carrying a pole, a white sheet and a round, flat pan in which evidently something had been burnt.

"Looks like the ghost outfit," thought Adam

Adams, as he crouched down behind some empty boxes and bins.

The fellow was tall, broad-shouldered and powerful looking, and Adam Adams felt certain he was not Matlock Styles. He wore a thin white bag over his head, with two holes for seeing purposes, and in one hand carried a flash lantern.

To the detective matters seemed to be growing tremendously interesting.

The man placed the things he carried in a closet partly filled with rubbish. Then he flashed his light around carefully. Adam Adams got down out of sight and placed his hand on the butt of his pistol. He was resolved to take no more risks than were absolutely necessary.

Presently the light was lowered, and taking a peep Adam Adams saw the man kneeling down and tugging away at an iron ring in the floor. Soon a trapdoor came up, and the man, taking up his lantern, disappeared from view, closing the trapdoor behind him.

The detective waited for several minutes and then stole forward in the utter darkness. He had measured the distance perfectly and found the iron ring with ease. He pulled upon it gently but firmly and raised the secret door several inches.

A look below showed nothing but darkness. He strained his ears, and heard a faint noise at a distance but could not determine whether it was the flowing of the river over the stones or something else.

He got out his pistol and examined it with care, to make certain that it was ready for use. Then, with a quick motion, he threw up the trap-door, dropped below, and closed the opening above him.

He felt as does a lion tamer stepping into a cage of beasts new to him. He realized that he was on the verge of some important discovery, but that this investigation might cost him his life.

He was on a narrow staircase. There were but ten steps and then he found himself between two stone walls with the roof just above his head. Not caring to take another drop into the unknown, he advanced slowly, taking no step until he was sure of it.

Presently he came to a turn and then another. He could now see a light shining ahead, coming from under a heavy wooden door. The barrier was tightly closed. He tried it softly, to find it fastened on the other side.

There was a strange whirr and a clicking in the apartment beyond, as if some machinery was in motion. But then came a loud voice and the other sounds stopped. By getting down on his hands and knees Adam Adams was enabled to hear nearly all that was said in the place beyond the barred door.

"I will listen to reports," said a voice which sounded much like that of Matlock Styles. "Number One, have you performed the ghostly manifestations?"

"I have, chief," was the answer.

"Did you notice anything unusual?"

"A boy and a girl on the other side of the river ran away as if the Old Nick were after them."

"Anything else?"

"No, but it's Number Three's turn after to-night."

"Very well; Number Three, take notice of that. Number Two, there are but six of you here to-night. What of the other two?"

"A note was left at the foot of the tree. They could not come, for one had business in New York and the other business in New Haven."

"Very well. Number Three, what of the goods you shipped to Philadelphia day before yesterday?"

"I have a telegram that it was safely received and payment will be made to-morrow."

"How much?"

"Two thousand dollars."

"That is fine. We are doing better than we did."

"I'll try to get more next time."

"Do so by all means. The more we get the better off we shall be and the sooner we can retire. Number Four, what have you to report?"

"I haven't heard from Albany yet. I think I'll hear to-morrow."

"What have you to say, Number Five?"

"I met my man last night. He won't touch the stuff—says it is too risky."

"Humph! What does he expect? A fortune for nothing? What have you to say, Number Six?"

"I got a long letter from Denver. The man out there will take twenty thousand dollars' worth at fifteen per cent."

"Didn't you tell him our rate was twenty-five per cent.?"

"I did, but he won't bite at that figure. He says he will go elsewhere."

"Where can he go?"

"He didn't say, but he swears he can get the goods."

"Not as good as ours. However, let him have the stuff at fifteen per cent. for the present."

There was a pause. "Now, has anybody got anything to say?"

"I have," spoke up the man called Number Three. "I say we must be careful. That tragedy at the Langmore house has brought a lot of detectives to this vicinity."

"Yes, I know that. One of them came over to the farm," answered the leader, and now Adam Adams was sure he was Matlock Styles.

"Came to the farm? What did you say to him?"

"I put him off the track. He will never bother us again, to my way of thinking."

"That's sure?" asked another of the men.

"Bloody sure."

"We must make certain——" began another of the number, when a noise outside of the door caused an interruption.

So interested had Adam Adams become in the conversation that he had not noticed the advance of two burly men upon him and he was not aware of their presence until one pounced on his back and made him a prisoner.

"What's the row out there?" came from within the room.

"A spy, boys! Open the door and help capture him!"

Instantly there was wild confusion. The door was flung open and seven men poured forth, each armed, and all wearing the white head coverings, such as has already been described.

It was a battle of one man against nine and the space was so small that Adam Adams could not turn himself. He drew his pistol, but while one man held his wrist another wrenched the weapon from his grasp. Then the detective went down and was severely kicked and pummelled, until to resist further was out of the question.

"He ought to be killed!" cried one man.

"That's right, kill him!" put in several.

"No! no! not yet. We must question him first," said another.

The band surrounded Adam Adams and several pistols were leveled at his head as he arose.

"It's funny how the nigger got down here——" began one of the men.

"Nigger?" broke in another. "He is no nigger. See how the black has rubbed off his face."

The men stepped closer and then one of them gave a start.

"It's the same man!" he cried excitedly. He turned to another. "I thought you said——"

"I did," was the agitated answer. "There's a bloomin' mystery here. He couldn't get out! He was bound and the door was locked—I locked it myself."

"Go and make sure."

Matlock Styles, for it was he, ran from the room and was gone several minutes. When he came back he was more disturbed than ever.

"You are right, he is gone!" he gasped. "Can this be the same man?" He made another examination of Adam Adams. "Yes, you are right. Well, he shall not get away again!" he added, significantly.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF MARGARET

"Tom, I tell you the best you can do is to make a clean breast of it and get Uncle Adam to help you."

It was Letty Bernard who spoke and she addressed Tom Ostrello. The two were seated on a bench in the park, where they had gone to talk matters over without fear of interruption or of being overheard. The conversation had lasted over two hours, and in that time the girl had learned many of the young man's secrets, and in return had told him a few things which had astonished and disturbed him.

He was much downcast and with good reason. For the past month many things had gone wrong with him. The one bright spot had been Letty's love for him, pure and strong, helping him to carry his burdens.

"That's an easy thing to say, Letty," he answered. "But it is not such an easy thing to do. Poor Dick is deep enough in the mud as it is, and it will not be to my credit to mention my connection with Matlock Styles."

"Yes, but Tom, you—you—Oh, how can I explain? Can't you trust me when I tell you that I am speaking for your own good? I—I know many things of which you are ignorant."

"Then why don't you tell me, Letty? Is it fair for you to keep silent?"

"No, but then you must remember that I am Mr. Adams' private clerk, and he is working on this case in the interests of Miss Langmore."

"I know he is working for her and I hope he clears her. I always thought she was a pretty nice kind of a girl, and I can't believe that she is guilty."

"Tom, did you ever imagine they would think you were guilty?" and she gazed at him earnestly, as if to search his very soul.

He started.

"Me? Why—why should anybody imagine I was guilty? It's—it's out of all reason." He drew a quick breath. "Letty, do you mean to insinuate that Mr. Adams imagines——"

"You mustn't ask me questions, Tom. But think over what you have told me—of that letter your brother Dick wrote asking for money, and how you visited the house on the very morning of the murder to get the money, and how Mr.

Langmore took the letter from your mother and tore it in half, and the scene afterwards."

"Yes, I know. But——"

"And then think of the way by which Mr. Langmore and your mother died. Killed by a curious poison, something that they inhaled, which, when the doctor got a whiff of it, gave him cramps in the stomach—a curious drug not generally known to medical science, a drug——"

He caught her by the wrist and looked fearfully, frightfully, into her face.

"Letty! My God!"

A short silence followed and she saw that he was thinking, deeply, swiftly. The cold perspiration stood out on his forehead but he did not appear to notice it. He dropped her wrist and his hand fell as if made of stone.

"Now you understand, Tom. I—I am speaking for I—I—want you to clear yourself."

"Then it has gone as far as this?" He gave a groan. "It was that drug—Letty, are you sure they have found out about that drug?"

"Yes, but do not say I said so."

"That drug is accursed—a Chinese student told me so. I laughed at him then, but now I believe it. The first time I carried it around with me I was wrecked in a railroad accident and had my arm hurt. Then, two weeks later, when I had it with me, I got caught in that hotel fire in Buffalo. After that a vial once broke on me and if I hadn't gotten away in a hurry I should have been smothered. And now——"

"Have you carried any of it lately?"

"No, not for a month. I was afraid of it, and so was the firm. We got rid of it, and I was glad of it." He bit his lip meditatively. "And they think—they suspect—that that drug was used? It may be."

"Cannot you trace where the drug went to, Tom?"

"That might be possible, although a good many people saw and heard of it while our firm handled it."

"Was any of it sold or used in the vicinity of Sidham?"

"No, but——" The young commercial traveler stopped short. "I think—But no, it can't be. And yet——"

"What, Tom?" she asked eagerly.

He shook his head. "What's the use? It would only drag me into the mud deeper. I really can't see what's to do," he went on with something of anguish in his tones.

"I am certain the very best thing you can do is to go to Uncle Adam and tell him everything. He will help you and clear up this great mystery."

"But he is working for Margaret."

"Yes, but I know he will work for you—after he has heard your story. But you must tell him everything."

"Where is he now?"

"Somewhere around your mother's home, or in Sidham, I think. I can find out for you."

"Very well, I will go to him and ask him if he is willing to side with me as well as with Margaret. But wait, I think I'll go and see Margaret first. You can send word to Mr. Adams that I want to see him. Tell him I will be at the Beechwood Hotel. He can send me a message there. Tell him I can clear up some points which may seem queer to him."

"I will, Tom," Letty looked much relieved. "Oh, I am sure he will help you! He has never yet failed to accomplish anything he has undertaken!"

An hour later saw Tom Ostrello on his way to Sidham. His face was careworn and he looked to be ten years older than he had a week before. He was in a thoughtful mood and scarcely looked out of the car window as the train rushed onward to its destination.

Arriving at the town, he speedily learned that Margaret had been taken to the home of Martha Sampson and was said to be in a serious if not dangerous state. This caused him to halt, and he was half inclined to give up the idea of interviewing her.

"It will only make her condition worse," he mused. "And, poor girl, she seems to have suffered more than her share already. Perhaps I had better wait until I hear from Adam Adams."

But then he determined to learn exactly how she was, anyway, and turned his footsteps toward the cottage, which stood on a side street of the town, backed up by a patch of woods leading to the river. He was just in sight of the place when he heard a cry, and a man came running out of the cottage, followed by a woman and a policeman.

"Where is she? Where is she?" cried the man, and Tom Ostrello recognized Raymond Case.

"Hullo! What's up?" queried the commercial traveler.

"Margaret! She is gone!" cried Raymond. He ran back of the house. "I can't see anything of her!" he added with a groan.

"Margaret gone? I thought she was sick."

"So she is. She was out of her mind and

slipped out of her room while the nurse went downstairs for some broth. I was in the parlor writing a letter."

"And I was on guard in the hallway," put in the policeman. "She didn't pass me, that I'll swear to."

"I was only gone a few minutes," said the nurse. "And I am sure she did not go through the kitchen."

"How long ago was this?" asked Tom Ostrello.

"Only a few minutes ago. Oh, we must find her," answered Raymond. "If she wanders off in her present state of mind there is no telling what will happen to her."

The four scattered, and a vigorous search was instituted for the missing girl. Soon the news spread and the chief of police came hurrying to the scene.

"Collins, you are responsible for this escape," said he sternly to the policeman.

"I did the best I could, sir," was the nervous answer. "She was that sick, sir, I didn't think she could get out of bed, much less walk off."

"Perhaps she is hiding in the house."

The building was searched from cellar to garret, and so were several other buildings in that vicinity, but without avail. Then the gathering crowd scattered through the woods and along the river.

"I don't believe she was as sick as they pretended," said one of the number. "This is only a bluff to let her get away. I said all along she was a sly one."

"Perhaps she pulled the wool over the doctor's eyes," came from another. "And over the eyes of that young fellow who's in love with her, too."

Raymond heard some of these remarks and they made his face burn. He longed to knock some of the speakers down, but held his temper in check as best he could. He realized that no argument he might advance would make an impression where opinions were so set.

Tom Ostrello joined in the search as diligently as the rest, and he and Raymond ran through the woods from end to end several times. Then they procured a boat and rowed up and down the river, and crossed over to the other side.

"She could not have gone far," said Raymond. "Her strength was not equal to it."

It was dark by the time they came back to the river, to cross to the town side. As they rowed along, slowly and silently, Tom Ostrello noticed something floating on the water. He steered toward the object and picked it up. It was a girl's summer hat.

"Margaret's hat!" cried Raymond. He dropped his oar and his face turned as white as death. "I know the truth now! She has drowned herself in the river!"

CHAPTER XXIV

ONE AGAINST MANY

SURROUNDED by his enemies, Adam Adams stood in the center of the stone room under the old mill, speculating upon what was to happen next. He saw that the men were thoroughly aroused and ready for any crime. Although all were masked by the hoods over their heads, each showed his rage and temper by his movements and his tone of voice.

"Well, now you are in our power, what have you to say for yourself?" came from Matlock Styles, after a pause.

"What do you want me to say?" returned the detective. "You have the best of the game just now, so it would seem."

"You're right—and we mean to keep it; eh, boys?"

"That's so," answered several.

"As a spy, he must suffer the fate of a spy," put in one of the number.

"Unless he consents to join us," added another.

"I'd never trust this bloody rascal," broke in Matlock Styles. "He's too sharp for us. He's a detective."

"If you don't mind telling, what is your business down here, Matlock Styles?" asked Adam Adams. He thought it best to put on a bold front, even with matters looking as black as they did.

"Ha! So you think you know me?" questioned the Englishman harshly.

"Of course, I know you."

"Well—it don't matter much—now," was the significant return.

"Are you transacting business down here?"

"Don't you know?"

"I do not."

"In that case, it's best to keep you ignorant."

"That's right, don't tell him a thing," came from one of the men who had first caught the detective.

"I want to know why you followed me up?" continued Matlock Styles. "You'll find it to your interest to answer me."

"I might answer as you have done and say it is best to keep you in ignorance. But I won't do it. I followed you up because I think you were connected with the Langmore murders."

At this Matlock Styles started, but quickly recovered.

"What made you think that?"

"Certain things I discovered around the mansion."

"Bah! That shows how you detectives often miss it. I was not near the Langmore house when the murders were committed."

"You can prove that?" questioned Adam Adams curiously.

"Of course I can. I was over to Stony Hill with my team, doing some trading. I stopped at the tavern and at the hardware store, and had quite a chat with several people there. I left home at eight o'clock in the morning and didn't get back until one o'clock in the afternoon. If you had taken the trouble you could easily have found out that what I have told you is the truth."

"You can prove that you were at Stony Hill from ten to twelve that morning?"

"I can easily do it. You can ask Doc Mason, at the hardware shop, Sam Ross at the tavern, and Dick Stout at the stables, besides a dozen others. Why, I was even talking to Mr. Anderson, the minister. He is thinking of buying a horse from me."

"That detective ain't going to prove anything," broke in one of the men.

"That's right," came from another. "He has got to take his medicine as a spy."

"Of course," said Matlock Styles. "I only wanted to satisfy his curiosity. Maybe he'll die feeling easier now."

His cold-blooded way of speaking made a chill run down Adam Adams' backbone. He was beginning to see the Englishman in a new light. The man was a master of deception, not as clumsy in thought and action as he assumed to be. And he was as heartless as a stone.

"Would you murder me?" asked the detective.

"It is the rule of our order that no man who acts the spy on us shall get away to tell of what he has discovered. How did you get away after I put you in that other room in the dark?"

"It was an easy trick."

"Won't you explain?"

"I might, but it would hinder my getting away in the present instance."

"You'll not get away again, never fear."

"Perhaps he didn't come alone!" exclaimed one of the other men. "He may have others with him, and they may have helped him to escape in the first place."

"He was alone when he came to the farm," answered the Englishman. And then he added:

"Bind him, and Number Three and Number Four shall remain on guard to watch him."

"Where shall we take him?" questioned Number Four.

"Take him to the last chamber. But blindfold him first. He has seen enough already."

In a moment Adam Adams was seized and bound in such a fashion that he could scarcely move a hand or a foot. Then a bag was placed over his head, with the eye-holes to the back, so that he could see absolutely nothing. He was led away, through a door opposite to the one he had entered and along a stone passageway. When the party came to a halt they were in a stone chamber, not over twelve feet square. Here the detective was tied fast to a ring in the wall and the two men sat down on a bench to guard him, lighting pipes and smoking in the meanwhile.

"Are you going to keep me blindfolded?" asked the detective.

"We are," was the surly response.

"For how long?"

"Until we get orders to do otherwise."

"Matlock Styles is your master, is he?"

"He is our chief. But you needn't to ask any questions about him."

"I don't intend to, but if you'll take this off my head I'll tell you something worth knowing," went on Adam Adams smoothly.

"Is this a game?" growled the fellow known as Number Three. "Because if it is, I warn you it won't work. We've got pistols and we can shoot."

"How can I play any game on you, tied up in this fashion? No, I want to see a little and get more air—and I want to get square on Matlock Styles."

The two guards consulted together and finally came to the conclusion to remove the head covering. The men had a lantern with them and one glance around showed the detective to what a stronghold he had been brought.

"Now, what have you got to say about Matlock?" asked one of the men.

"You say he is your chief. Have you any idea as to whether he is treating you fairly?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"Well, perhaps it is nothing to me, but if I was taking the risks you take I'd want all that was coming to me."

"We get our share."

"How do you know? I once exposed a gang of counterfeiters in Maine and I found that the chief, Bill Davidson, was getting the lion share of the returns. More than that, when the exposure came, Davidson tried his best to get out of it by turning State's evidence."

"And did he get out?" asked one of the men, becoming interested.

"No, he did not. I would not allow it. I got two of the other men to tell the truth, and Davidson got twenty years."

"And what of the other men?"

"One got scared and ran away and the authorities let him slide. The other man was not prosecuted. The rest of the gang, four of them, got from five to twelve years each."

"Are you a government detective?"

"Not exactly, although I occasionally work for the government. Here is another thing I want you two fellows to know. The government has been hot-footed after your counterfeits ever since they were first marketed."

"Humph, they ain't found out much."

"You are mistaken, they have found out a great deal. I am only at one end of this game, and I must say I have put my foot into it bad."

"That's right," commented Number Three. He was a small-built man and evidently of a vicious temper.

"I am sorry in more ways than one," continued the detective, not appearing to notice the interruption. "I'd like to get out of this mess and get ahead of the other fellows working on this case. It would mean great credit to me and a big reward besides. The gang is bound to be rounded up very soon now, and when one or two are caught they'll tell on the others. If I could get somebody to help me out of this scrape, and put me next to the whole game, I'd pay him well and see that he got out with a whole skin in the bargain."

"Look here, you can't bribe me, so don't try it!" growled Number Three. "I'm in this game to a finish, see? I never got caught yet and I don't intend to begin now."

"All counterfeiters get caught sooner or later." Adam Adams directed his words especially to Number Four, a big-boned young man, who was plainly nervous. The fellow fumbled with his pipe but made no reply.

"I always help the man who helps me," went on the detective. "And I am so well known in my profession that my word counts for a great deal. I can save a man if he will only put his trust in me. I have done it many a time."

"Ah, I don't want to hear your fairy stories," growled Number Three, but Number Four merely shrugged his shoulders, knocked his pipe clean and restored the article to his pocket.

The detective continued to talk, in a low and earnest manner. He was really pleading for his life, for he realized that it was not Matlock Styles' intention to let him escape again. As soon as the counterfeiters were sure the coast was clear outside, they would turn again to the prisoner and settle his fate.

Thus an hour passed and then came a low whistle. A minute later Matlock Styles entered the stone chamber.

"We'll get to business again," he said shortly. "We have no time to spare."

"What are you going to do next?" asked Number Four, and Adam Adams thought he detected a tremor in the tones.

"We are going to draw lots as to who is to dispose of the prisoner."

"How is he to be killed?" asked Number Three.

"That can be decided by the man who draws the red ball," was the Englishman's cold-blooded response.

CHAPTER XXV

IN THE HANDS OF THE ENEMY

"If I can't get away now I am doomed!"

It was Adam Adams who uttered the words in a low but firm voice. He sat on a small bench, in the stone chamber. His feet were bound with a rope and his hands were chained to a ring in the wall behind him.

The counterfeiters had started to draw lots, to see who should be the one to do the detective to death. Then had come an interruption, in the shape of an important message, and the detective had been bundled off by himself, while the communication was under discussion.

Adam Adams knew that his situation was a desperate one. The counterfeiters were a gang who would stop at nothing to keep their secrets. The only one who appeared to be at all timid was the fellow known as Number Four. Possibly if he could get this fellow alone and work on his feelings Number Four might aid him. But just now such a course seemed out of the question.

The detective listened attentively, but only a faint murmur of voices reached his ears. The counterfeiters were having an animated discussion over something, but they were on their guard so that not even their prisoner might hear.

"Wonder why they are so careful?" mused the detective grimly. "If they are going to take my life I don't see what difference it will make whether I know their secrets or not."

Adam Adams was not the man to give in easily. Upon every case where his services were called for, he usually "kept at it" until every possibility was exhausted. He did not give in now, yet it must be confessed, being but human, his heart was somewhat heavy.

"I'll have to take chances," he told himself. "Anything is better than to let them kill me in cold blood."

He waited for a few minutes, to find out if anybody was coming to watch him. One of the counterfeiters came in, looked him over in silence, and then passed out again, this time closing the door more tightly than before.

As soon as the fellow had departed, Adam Adams commenced to work on his bonds. He had studied all sorts of handcuffs, and knew well how to manage his hands and wrists when being fastened. He had not been able to get the better of the fellow at the cottage, but now it was different, and, with a twist of his wrists, he withdrew first one hand and then the other.

With his hands free, it was an easy matter to untie his feet. This done, he arose and tiptoed his way to the door. He opened the barrier with caution, and peered out.

The sight that met his gaze was not a reassuring one. The counterfeiters sat on all sides of the room, and each had a pistol where it could be gotten at with ease.

"It's got to be done!" Matlock Styles was saying. "It should have been done long ago."

"All right, I'll do it," grumbled another member of the band. "But I'll be running a big risk."

"Not half the bloomin' risk I've been running," grumbled the Englishman.

"What about the word from Buffalo?" asked another.

"We'll settle that to-night—after we have settled about our prisoner."

"I've got to get back to New York."

"How soon?"

"Just as soon as possible."

"Do you want to take the letter along?"

"Yes; I gave my word I'd bring the letter."

"All right, then; we'll have to write the letter, and each man sign it," said Matlock Styles. "But, I must say, I don't like this way of doing things."

"No more do I," growled another of the band.

"It's putting a fellow's head under the axe," came from Number Four.

"Oh, don't get scared!" came from another. "I know Luffer—he's O. K."

"Everybody is O. K. until he gets in a tight corner and squeals," grumbled Number Four.

"Kicking again, eh?" roared Matlock Styles, glaring sourly at Number Four.

"Oh, no; I'll do as the others say!" answered the big-boned young man, but with a slight tremble in his voice. Then all of the counterfeiters gathered around a table, to dictate and sign a certain letter some outside party had demanded.

Adam Adams did not stop to listen to all of this conversation. He felt that if he was to get away he must lose no time in making the attempt. For a moment he thought to rush past the counterfeiters and try to gain the regular entrance to the den, but then he realized the foolishness of such an attempt. Before he got a dozen steps, they would fire at him, and, most likely, kill him.

He closed the door gently, and, seeing a small stick of wood on the floor, stuck this under the barrier and shoved it as tight as possible. Then he took up the bench and braced this under the handle of the door, so that to shove the door inwards would be all but impossible.

"Now, then, to see if there is some other way out," he mused.

A lantern, hanging on a nail, lit up the stone chamber. Taking the light in hand, he commenced a rapid but thorough investigation of his prison.

The walls were practically solid, the only break being at the door and on the opposite side, where there had once been another door. This second doorway had been bricked up to within six inches of the top, which had been left open, probably for ventilation.

Standing on tiptoes, Adam Adams held up the lantern and looked through the ventilating space. Some cool air coming in, told him that the passageway beyond must lead to the outer world.

"If that opening was only a bit larger a fellow might crawl through," was what he told himself.

He set the lantern down and felt of the wall, putting his arm through the opening. It was about a foot thick, and the bricks were well laid, in good cement.

"Not much show there," he reasoned grimly. "If a fellow had time, it could be done. But it would take hours—with only a pocketknife—and they'd be sure to hear the noise. I must see if there isn't some other way."

He listened at the door for a moment. The counterfeiters were still at work over the letter, and another angry discussion was in full sway. Then he held up the lantern, looking at the flooring over his head.

The planks were heavy but old, and several of them looked to be pretty well rotted. Picking up a stick that was handy, he poked at one plank after another. It was not long before he came to one that was so far decayed that the end of the stick went through it with ease.

There was nothing to stand upon but the bench, and so he took it away from the door and placed it directly under the decayed plank. Then he stood up and pushed on the plank with both hands. It gave way, sending down a shower of dust and mold in his face, and almost blinding him.

He had made considerable noise, but angry words between the men in the other chamber drowned out the sounds. Catching up the lantern once more, he lifted it through the opening over his head, and tried to look around.

He could see but little, excepting boxes and barrels, some as decayed as was the floor. Evidently the apartment above had once been a storeroom, but had not been used for years.

Adam Adams did not speculate long over what to do next. He felt that the farther he got from the counterfeiters the better off he would be. Setting the lantern on the floor above, he took a firm hold on a plank that looked fairly strong, and drew himself up. It was a tight squeeze, but he had been through many tight squeezes before, so did not mind it.

Once in the storeroom, his next move was to place what was left of the broken plank into position, and on it he piled several empty boxes and barrels.

"That may keep them guessing as to how I got out of the room below," he thought. "They'll find out sooner or later—but the later the better."

Lantern in hand, he moved cautiously around the old storeroom. There were many empty boxes and barrels, and also sacks that contained musty flour. Rats were in evidence, and they scurried hither and thither as the detective moved around.

It was not long before he discovered two doors. One was nailed up, and where it led to, he could not surmise. The other stood partly open, and through it came a whiff of fresh air.

"That smells like liberty," he thought, as he breathed in the fresh air.

He looked down a passageway, with a flooring partly of brick and partly of stone. Where it led to, there was no telling.

Feeling that it would be unwise to use the light longer, he put it out. But he kept the lantern in his hand, for possible use in the future, either to show the way or as a weapon.

The passageway made several turns, and in the darkness he had to feel his way along. Then he reached a flight of stone steps, leading downward.

"I don't want to go down—I want to go up," he reasoned. But there seemed no help for it, and down he went, sixteen steps, to land in a small room at the bottom.

Here all was pitch-dark, and for the moment he stood still, not knowing in what direction to move next. All around him were stone walls.

Presently he felt a small iron door. He took hold of the handle and found the door locked.

Curious to learn his whereabouts, he felt for a match, struck it, and lit the lantern once more. A brief glance at the door caused a look of wonder to overspread his face. The door was locked with a combination lock similar in make-up to the lock on a safe.

He gazed around, and soon learned that there was no exit from where he was, save by the flight of stone steps. To get out, he would have to go back.

He gazed again at the small iron door, set in an iron frame, embedded in the stone wall. What could be behind that barrier? Most likely something of great value.

On the floor at his feet was a bit of dirty white paper. Mechanically, he picked it up and looked it over. On it was the following:

O—4
L 2—12
R 3 53
L 2 44

"The combination!" he murmured. "Somebody had it on that paper and dropped it. Shall I try to work it, or try to get out?"

His better judgment told him he should try to make his escape. But he was curious to know what was behind that iron door; and, setting the lantern down, he commenced to work the combination knob. He twirled the knob around four times and stopped at 0. Then he began on the combination proper—twice to the left, stopping at 12; three times to the right, stopping at 53; and then twice to the left again, stopping at 44. Then he came around slowly to o again. There followed a click. The combination was off.

He twisted the handle of the iron door and pulled upon it. It came open noiselessly, revealing a stone chamber beyond, eight feet square, and equally high.

Lantern in hand, Adam Adams stepped into the vault and gazed around eagerly. On two sides were wooden shelves, six in number. On the shelves rested several boxes, of wood and of metal.

He opened one of the boxes, and gazed at the contents with interest. It contained a quantity of haired paper, almost an exact duplicate of the haired paper used in the making of banknotes.

He looked at another box. This also contained paper. The third box held a quantity of counterfeits, the amount of which made even the matter-of-fact detective gasp.

"If they ever floated these, they would be the richest gang of counterfeiters in the world!" was his mental comment. He had no idea of the exact amount, but saw that it would total up to a tremendous sum.

He turned to one of the metal boxes. It was empty, and he set it down again. Then he took up another box that was fairly heavy, and threw open the cover.

There, resting on some thick blotting paper, was a counterfeit plate—a plate undoubtedly used for printing the backs of the spurious $100 bills!

Adam Adams could not help but gaze at that plate with interest. How the Secret Service men had worked to bring that plate to light, and arrest the users! And here he, in following up the clues of one crime, had stumbled upon the broad trail of another.

As he put the plate down, a noise reached his ears. By instinct, he blew out the lantern and listened. The noise was that from footsteps at a distance. Then he heard a murmur of voices, quickly growing louder.

"They have discovered my escape," he told himself. And then he blamed himself for not having made better use of his time in an endeavor to get away.

He stepped out of the vault, and listened with strained ears. The counterfeiters had separated, and were searching in all directions for him.

"If they come this way, I'll have to fight," he reasoned. "I might as well die that way, as to be killed in cold blood."

But then a sudden idea came to him, and as quickly as he had left the vault, he returned to it. Footsteps were coming closer, and he had no time to spare.

One of the shelves of the vault was close to the top and very broad. Up on this climbed the detective, and laid out at full length, as close to the wall as possible. In front of him he held two of the wooden boxes containing the haired paper.

Somebody came closer, and he heard talking in the passageway at the foot of the stone steps. A hand was placed on the door of the vault.

"Who left this unlocked?" came in Matlock Styles' voice.

"Is it unlocked?" asked another of the band.

"Yes."

"That is strange. It was locked yesterday; I am sure of it."

"Maybe that bloody rascal got here!" growled the Englishman.

"How could he work the combination?"

"Oh, some of those chaps are keener than you think. Wait, hold up the light."

Matlock Styles opened the door and gazed into the vault. For the moment he saw nothing.

"Not here," he said briefly. "Come on; we'll have to look elsewhere."

CHAPTER XXVI

DOOMED TO DIE

"WAIT a minute!" came from the other man, as Matlock Styles was on the point of coming out of the vault.

"What do you want?"

"I want to get some of that new paper."

"Oh, you can get there after we have caught our man."

"I'll take it now—it won't take a minute."

The man pushed his way into the vault. He took hold of a box. Then he suddenly backed away.

"He's in there!" he gasped.

"In there? Where?"

"There—on the shelf! Look out!"

"Ha! So he is!" ejaculated Matlock Styles. He, too, leaped back. "I've got him, too, the skunk!"

Both of the counterfeiters leaped into the passageway. Adam Adams came down from the shelf. But the movement was not swift enough.

As he leaped towards the iron door, it was banged shut in his face. Then the combination knob was twirled around.

"Ha! ha! That's the time we caught you like a rat in a trap!" sang out the Englishman in triumph.

"Sure it was our man?" queried his companion. "I didn't get a very good look."

"Yes, it was our man, the bloody villain!"

"He's a slick one!"

"So he is—but he'll not get away again. Go and tell the others that it is all right—that we have him," went on Matlock Styles.

"You are sure he can't get out of there?"

"Not in a hundred years! He'd have to blast his way out to do it."

"Then it's all right," returned the other man, and walked away up the flight of stone steps.

"Now, then, you have come to the end of your rope, you bloomin', bloody rascal!" cried Matlock Styles, when he was left alone in front of the vault. "You'll not get out of there until I open the door."

"Styles, supposing we talk this matter over?" suggested Adam Adams, as calmly as he could.

"Talk it over? What do you mean?"

"Let me out, and I'll explain."

"I'll not let you out."

"It won't do you any good to keep me in here."

"I know better."

"Don't think that I am alone on this case, for I am not. If you harm me, you'll take the consequences."

"Bah! You can't scare me! I'm not a baby. If you weren't alone, some of your chums would be after you long ago. You thought to run me and my gang down single-handed, and have your praises sung in every bloomin' newspaper of the country! I know your kind. But I've got you now like a rat in a trap. And you'll get out like the rat does—after he's dead."

"You won't talk then?"

"No—at least, not now. Perhaps I'll talk later. But I'll not give you your liberty," and thus speaking Matlock Styles tried the door of the vault, to make certain that it was secure, and walked away.

It must be confessed that Adam Adams felt that he was in a dangerous situation—a situation in which the majority of men would have given up utterly. He still had his lantern, and this he lit once more, and by its rays examined every foot of the vault in which he was a prisoner.

He saw little that gave him encouragement. The sides and flooring were of stone and brick, well put together and strong. The ceiling was likewise of brick, resting on arches of iron.

"Looks as if I was booked to stay here!" he muttered grimly, as he viewed the situation. "No getting out as I got out of that other hole."

He noticed that the air was not good, and this soon gave him cause for additional alarm. If he could not get any fresh air, he might smother before anybody came to release him.

Once more he went over the walls and the flooring, and even pounded on the iron door. It was all to no purpose. He was as close a prisoner as if encased in a stone tomb.

"Perhaps they will leave me here until I either smother or starve to death," he reasoned. "It would be an easy way of disposing of me. And Miss Langmore and Mr. Case would wonder how I came to disappear so mysteriously."

He set the boxes on the floor, and, standing on one of them, proceeded to examine the roofing of the vault more carefully. He found one of the iron arches a bit loose at one end, and pulled upon it with all his might.

The result was greater than he had anticipated. The iron brace came down, and with it fell several dozens of brick, some hitting the detective on the legs and feet. He shrank back against the shelves, and so avoided getting the shower on his head. The lantern was smashed, leaving him in total darkness.

As soon as the fall was over, he pulled the boxes from beneath the bricks and piled them one on top of the other. Mounting as high as he could, he felt around, secured a hold on some bricks and stones above, and hauled himself upward.

"Now to get out somehow!" he told himself. "No more lingering in this den of criminals!"

He felt around, as he moved forward. On all sides the walls were wet and slimy. He advanced with care, resolved to avoid all pitfalls, were it possible to do so. He was in a place where the roofing was no higher than his shoulders, so he had to stoop as he progressed.

A moment later he found himself in a narrow passageway, with rocks on one side and a heavy wooden partition on the other. Through a slit in the partition a faint light was streaming.

Adam Adams tiptoed his way to the slit and looked through. Beyond he made out the printing room of the counterfeiting plant. Only one man was present, the big-boned fellow known as Number Four. He was seated on the corner of a rude table, idly tearing some paper into strips, and evidently thinking deeply.

As the detective was about to move on, another person entered the printing room.

"Did they get him?" asked Number Four eagerly.

"Yes," was the short reply.

"Where was he?"

"You'd never guess."

"At the river?"

"No; in the vault."

"What! How did he get there?"

"Nobody knows. He must have found the door open. But its against the rules for anybody to leave that door unlocked."

"I know that," said Number Four, and heaved a deep sigh.

"Say, you don't like your job, do you?" went on the other counterfeiter, with a sniff.

"Would you like it?" demanded Number Four, half angrily.

"Well, not particularly."

"When I joined this gang, I did it to make money, both ways. I didn't join to kill folks."

"Sure, that's true. But the fellow deserves what he'll get. He is a spy, and when a fellow spies on the likes of us he takes his life in his hands—and he knows it."

"Well, that may be so. Just the same, I'm sorry I drew the red ball," went on Number Four.

"Ain't going to back out, are you?"

"Humph! How can I back out? Styles wouldn't allow it."

"You bet he wouldn't—and none of us would, for that matter. If I had drawn the red ball I would have done what was asked of me, and no shirking—and you've got to do the same."

"I ain't shirking," growled Number Four. "I'll do my duty. But I don't like the job," and then he arose and left the room.

Adam Adams had moved on, too—down the dark passageway. Soon he came to a place so narrow that he squeezed through with difficulty. Here he stepped into a nest of rats, and one bit him in the ankle, causing him to give an involuntary cry of pain. The rats were all around, and he had to hiss quite loudly to make them keep their distance.

He could now smell the water, and knew he must be close to the river. Once in the stream, he felt that he could swim to safety. But he must look our for more traps.

Another turn, and he found the water flowing at his feet. Far ahead was a faint glimmer of light. He entered the water and pushed forward. Then, of a sudden, he came to a halt. He had heard the sound of somebody rowing.

The small boat passed, and all became silent once more. Again he pushed on, and presently reached a spot at the edge of the old mill. He was under a dock. Close at hand rested a rowboat, with the oars across the seats.

"The boat for mine—if I can get into it without being seen," the detective told himself.

With added caution, he waded around to the stern of the rowboat, and peered around carefully. Not a soul seemed to be in sight, and, with care, he climbed over the stern of the craft.

"Stop!" came a cry. "Here he is!"

He turned and leaped to the oars. As he did this, something whizzed through the air. It struck him on the head, and over he went, across the seats of the boat. He clutched wildly at the air; and then his senses forsook him.

"Who is it?" came another call.

"That rascal who escaped!"

"It can't be—he is in the vault."

"Come, see for yourself. Quick!"

Three men came rushing to the spot, and the rowboat was hauled close to the dock. The counterfeiters pounced upon Adam Adams, and by the time he had recovered his senses, he was again a close prisoner. Then Matlock Styles appeared.

"He is a wizard!" ejaculated the Englishman. "But he shall not get away again! I'll guard him myself—until Number Four finishes him!"

CHAPTER XXVII

TOM OSTRELLO'S STORY

On the following evening, at exactly seven o'clock, an old man came to the depot at Sidham and met the incoming train. He was rather feeble in his movements and hobbled rather than walked to meet a man who came in with a portfolio under his arm.

"Excuse me, but is this Mr. Granby?" he asked in a quavering voice.

"That's my name," said the new arrival, with a slight start.

"How are the sketches getting along? I hope you are making a good picture of my daughter."

"Very good, I think, sir. If you will come to my room, I will show you my proof."

"All right, sir," answered the old man.

The two men left the depot, and crossing the roadway, walked to a hotel on the next block. They ascended to the third floor and made their way to a fine apartment in the front. Here the door was locked, the curtains drawn, and the gas was lit. Then both men removed wigs and false whiskers, and there stood revealed Charles Vapp and Adam Adams.

"You are on time, I see," said the latter, as he dropped into an easy chair and lit a cigar.

"Yes, I was lucky enough to get your telegram directly after it came in. The trail took me near the office and Frank passed it to me."

"What of the man you have been following?"

"He is looking for you."

"Do you know the reason?"

"Yes. He has had several talks with Letty Bernard, and she has advised him to speak to you, and tell you everything, whatever that may mean. The girl told him that you could clear him."

"Humph! She takes a good deal for granted. Anything else?"

"Do you know that Margaret Langmore has disappeared?"

"So I heard, less than an hour ago."

"They say she ran away to escape trial."

"Perhaps so, but if she did she was out of her head. It is too bad, for it complicates matters."

"By your telegram I see that you want me to turn to something else," went on Charles Vapp, after a pause.

"I do." Adam Adams drew a long breath.

"Charley, wonderful things can happen in twenty-four hours."

"I know that, Adam."

"Last night I was doomed to die. I was in the hands of one of the worst band of evil-doers I ever ran across. They drew lots as to who should slay me—just as the Anarchists draw lots to kill one who has been marked by them."

"And you escaped?"

"If I hadn't I shouldn't be here. It's a long story. As luck would have it, the foul deed fell to the lot of a fellow known as Number Four. He was a weak-kneed chap, and I had previously spoken to him about getting caught and imprisoned, and I said I would befriend anybody who would befriend me. He was to shoot me, tie my body in a bag with rocks, and sink me to the bottom of the river. He said he would do the job only when alone and the others took him at his word. When he got me where he wanted me, he told his story. He used to be poor but honest, and was once sent up for a theft that he had not committed. The gang got hold of him, when he came out of prison, and he was made to join the band. He said he did not want to kill anyone, that he was sick of what he had been doing, and wanted to reform. I promised him a thousand dollars if he would let me go, and promised not to testify against him, if he would tell me all he knew. He took me at my word, and sank a sack full of grass and stones to the bottom of the river, instead of yours truly. Then he came away with me, told me some astonishing things, took his thousand dollars; and I haven't seen him since, and I doubt if he will ever show himself again."

"You were more than lucky. But what is this band—if it is any of my business?"

Adam Adams leaned forward.

"Don't breathe it to a soul, not even at headquarters," he whispered. "I have located a band of counterfeiters—the makers of that clever counterfeit bill on the Excelsior National Bank of New York. You've heard of it—the one they said was printed from the Racksburg plates."

"Sure, the one Fields tried to run to earth last year."

"The same."

"That's a big feather in your cap."

"In following up one thread I seem to have gotten away from another. I started out to find the murderer of Mr. and Mrs. Langmore. I thought I had a line on one fellow, but it would seem now that he can readily prove a complete *alibi.*"

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to keep your eyes on certain people in and around this town, and especially on that Matlock Styles. If you see any indications of his running away, arrest him on the spot. Here is a list of the men to be watched." Adam Adams brought out a slip of paper. Then he described the old mill. "The counterfeiters' rendezvous is under that mill," he continued. "They make folks think the place is haunted and Styles has savage dogs on his farm near by, and that keeps the curious away. I want you to watch the mill, too, if you can. But keep out of all danger. If any of the gang try to trap you shoot them down, for if they catch you they won't be apt to let you get away alive. If you wish get Strong to help you."

"I understand, and I'll be on my guard," said the assistant.

After that the pair conversed for a quarter of an hour longer and then, after making some changes in his disguise, Charles Vapp hurried from the hotel and out into the darkness of what looked as if it would prove a stormy night.

As soon as Vapp had gone, Adam Adams sat down and penned a brief note. This he sent out by a hotel messenger, and then sank back in his easy chair, to smoke and to meditate.

The detective had learned much, yet about certain things he was in the dark as much as ever. The mysterious Number Four—he had not asked the penitent for his name—had given him the names and addresses of fourteen men connected with the band of counterfeiters. Eleven of these individuals were makers of the bogus bank bills, and the other three operated in the big cities, disposing of the "goods" in bulk to others, who in their turn, fed the bad bills to the general public.

So far as Number Four knew, Matlock Styles was the head of the gang, but the man had said there was another individual, to whom Styles often went for advice. This man was considered to be very shrewd, but what his name was there was no telling. Number Four ventured a guess that he might be connected with the United States treasury department.

After his escape from the den, Adam Adams had gone to Stony Hill in secret, and there verified Matlock Styles' story that the Englishman had not been near the Langmore mansion during the time the murders were committed. So, from that crime, at least, the counterfeiter was apparently cleared.

But this only made the mystery connected with the counterfeits in the safe so much deeper. Number Four had never mentioned Barry Langmore when speaking of the members of the gang, and when questioned about the man, said he had known him by sight and that was all.

Less than an hour after he had sent out the messenger, there came a knock on the door and Tom Ostrello presented himself.

"You are the gentleman that wishes to see me?" he inquired.

"I believe you wish to see me," was the reply, as the detective closed the door and locked it again. "Sit down, Mr. Ostrello. I am Adam Adams."

"Oh, I—er—I didn't quite recognize you in that dress."

"I suppose not." There was a brief pause. "Mr. Ostrello, if you wish to speak to me, I am at your disposal for the next hour."

"Thank you." The young commercial traveler cleared his throat. "You are—I mean, I believe you know the relationship between Miss Bernard and myself?"

"She has told me something about that."

"She tells me you are her closest friend—that you have really been a father to her since her own parent died. And she tells me that you are one of the greatest detectives in the world. I wish I had known that when we first met—I should have engaged you to clear up the mystery of this sad affair."

The young man paused again. Evidently it was hard work for him to get directly at the subject on hand. Adam Adams remained silent.

"I did not imagine that I—well, that I would be connected with this great crime. I mean, that anybody would suspect that I had done the deed. It is a fearful thought! That I would kill my own mother! I know such things have been done, but they must have been done by beasts, not men. I know I should have spoken of the visit that very morning to my mother."

"Then you admit that you called at the house?"

"Yes."

"You were dressed in a gray suit and wore a slouch hat, and you entered by the back way?"

"How did you learn all that?" cried the young commercial traveler in astonishment.

"Never mind. In coming away you slipped and fell, and your hat dropped off."

Tom Ostrello nodded. "I understand that somebody must have noticed me after all. I came in by the back way because I missed the train for Sidham, and took that which stops only at Chester. It is a short cut through the woods from Chester Station to the Langmore place.

When I came away I had just time enough to catch another train at Chester, and I was very anxious to get back to the city, for I had an important engagement with one of my customers."

"I understand. Proceed, please."

"I came to the house for two reasons. In the first place, as perhaps you know, my brother, Dick, is a spendthrift, and works occasionally only. He got into a scrape in Los Angeles, and telegraphed me to help him out financially. It was an old plea, but I thought if I left him to himself my mother would not forgive me. I did not have money enough to help him by myself, for my capital was tied up in such a fashion that I could not get at it. More than that, I had in my possession two one hundred dollar bills, which my mother had gotten from Mr. Langmore, and both of these were counterfeits."

"One of those bills you had tried to pass at a theatre, eh?"

"Ha! You know that, too! Then you have been following me up?"

"The United States Government has been trying to follow up those bills for several years."

"I came to the house and saw my mother. Mr. Langmore had gone to the bank. There had been a family row, but that was not all of the trouble. Mr. Langmore was strangely excited, so my mother said, and had declared he was going to have somebody arrested, before the week was out."

"On account of the counterfeits?"

"Either that, or on account of a patent. She said he had sent off several letters and was also going to telegraph to somebody. She said he had asked her to give back the hundred dollar bills, and had been much disturbed when she told him that I had them. She took the bills back and gave me good money for them, and also gave me two hundred dollars more, to forward to my brother Dick, which I did, adding a hundred of my own."

"Did your mother tell you anything more about the counterfeits?"

"No."

"Did you see Miss Langmore?"

"I did not, nor did I see the servant. I was in a hurry, and so I came away as soon as my business was accomplished."

"When you came away from the house and dropped your hat, did you go back again, crawling along by the bushes?"

"I certainly did not."

"Did you see any other man around?"

"Not there. I caught a glimpse of a man when I was hurrying through the woods to the station."

"When you came to the house, after the tragedy, Mr. Ostrello, what were you so anxious about?"

"You mean what was I looking for?"

"Yes."

"A letter Dick had sent me. It told about his trouble. I thought at first it might be in the library, but I found it in my mother's room. It contained an account of the scandal he had gotten into. I did not wish that scandal to become public property. I can show you that letter if you wish to see it."

"Lately you have had some trouble with a man named Matlock Styles. What was that about?"

"It was over a patent. I thought of an idea for a machine to box up pills in a new way, and spoke to Mr. Langmore about it. I left some papers with Mr. Langmore and I think Styles got hold of them and applied for the patent. We had several disputes, and at last he threatened to get me into trouble with the firm I represent. He said he had influence, and as I didn't want to lose my job, I didn't press him about the patent. He acts like a farmer, but he is a shrewd fellow, and not to be trusted."

"You went back to the house lately, on the sly—told Mrs. Morse you wanted some books."

"I admit it. I wanted to get some of my

mother's private papers. Now she is dead, I wish to look out for any share of the estate that may be coming to my brother Dick and myself. Isn't that natural? It was foolish of me to run away as I did, but—well, I was nervous. This tragedy has completely unnerved me, and I hardly know what I am doing."

"How about this bit of wrapping paper?" and Adam Adams brought forth the piece he had found under Mr. Langmore's safe.

"I do not know where that came from, but it is evidently a part of some of my firm's advertising. The first three lines are the name and address. The last line reads, 'Keep dark'."

"I found this under the library safe."

"That is not to be wondered at. Some time ago, I remember, I got some powders for Mr. Langmore, for headaches. I remember the box had a wrapper of that sort on it. The powders lose their strength if exposed to the sunlight. And that reminds me, you—you think these murders were committed through the agency of a Chinese powder—*yamlang-peholo*—a powder my firm once introduced in this country."

"The evidence points that way."

"I know of nobody around that house who had any of the accursed stuff, for it certainly was accursed. I never took any there—or, at least, if I ever did, I do not remember taking it out of my grip."

"Can you furnish me with a list of people who received this stuff from you or from others?"

"I can. On my way to Sidham I made out this list, and here it is," and the young man brought it forth.

Adam Adams glanced at it quickly, and read over the long line of names and addresses—doctors, druggists and private individuals. Suddenly he paused and a smile of triumph lit up his features.

"Good!" he almost shouted.

"You have discovered something?" asked Tom Ostrello quickly.

"Yes, I have discovered a great deal. I think the murder mystery is as good as solved."

CHAPTER XXVIII

WHAT HAPPENED TO MARGARET

It is said by specialists that the human brain can stand just so much, and no more. The tension becomes so great—something snaps—and then? The question is one, hard, if not impossible, to answer.

So it was with poor Margaret, hounded by the well-meaning but ignorant officers of the law of the community in which the double crime had been committed. So searching had been the questions put, so strong the accusations, that the reasoning powers of the girl were completely shattered. She imagined herself guilty—imagined herself being taken to prison, to be hung or electrocuted, and in a hundred ways suffered the mental tortures of the eternally condemned.

Then came à change, when she grew hysterical and laughed softly to herself. No! no! she must not let them hang or electrocute her! It would be too much of a disgrace! She must escape such a fearful fate!

But how? There could be but one answer to that question. She must contrive in some way to outwit her enemies—she must escape—must fly to some place where they would never be able to find her.

It is said that those who are insane are usually shrewd, and so it was in Margaret's case. She prepared to run away, but she did not allow the nurse or the doctor to become aware of what she was doing. She waited until the doctor had made another call, and then asked the nurse to fix her something special to eat.

"Why, yes, I'll get whatever you wish, my dear!" said the nurse, and went below to prepare the food.

No sooner had the woman disappeared than Margaret leaped from her bed and began to dress. All of her things, even to her hat, were in a closet of the bedroom, so this was easy.

"How shall I go?" she asked herself. She knew, from the talk she had heard, that a policeman was somewhere around, watching the house. She looked out of a window and saw him, leaning against a fence, taking occasional sly puffs from a pipe he held in the hollow of his hand.

She did not dare descend the stairs. She looked out of the window. It was not very far to the roof of a porch, and against the porch was a trellis, with a wealth of honeysuckle growing upon it.

How she did it, Margaret could not afterwards remember. But she crawled forth from the window, and climbed down the trellis as if it were a ladder. The sweet scent of the honeysuckle made her sick, and she came close to falling in a faint at the foot of the vines.

Reaching the ground, she stared around like a frightened fawn seeking to hide from the hunters. Then, without knowing why, she sped for the river bank.

The water looked cool and inviting, and for several minutes the beautiful girl stood there, gazing steadily down into those depths. Should she make a leap and end it all?

"It would be the easiest way out of it!" she moaned to herself. "The easiest way, and nobody would care!"

But, as she bent lower, she seemed to see reflected, not her own face, but the face of Raymond. With a cry of despair, she shrank back as if struck a blow.

"No! no! It will not do!" she moaned. "Not that! Not that!"

She ran along the river bank until she came to where a rowboat was tied up. On the seats were the oars, and, scarcely knowing what she was doing, she leaped into the craft, untied the painter, and took up the oars.

The fresh air seemed to give her strength, and she pulled on and on. She grew thirsty and stopped to drink some of the water and to bathe her face and hands. While doing this, her hat slipped overboard and drifted away, but she did not notice this.

Presently she took up the oars once more, and rowed along the stream until she reached a spot where there was an island. Here she went ashore, hiding the rowboat in the bushes.

It was only a small island, but in the center some boys had erected a hut where they had once camped out. Margaret dragged herself to this shelter. Her strength was almost gone now, and, as she dropped on a rude bench, her senses forsook her.

She did not remain unconscious long, but during that time she had a dream or vision. She imagined that she was back home once more, and that her father and her stepmother were alive and well, and that the bitter quarrelling had come to an end. She sat up and brushed the tumbled hair from her forehead.

"It—it must have been a dream!" she murmured. "It can't be true—that daddy is dead! I—I must go home and find out!"

She was surprised to find herself on the island, but the sight of the rowboat brought with it a memory of how she had used the craft, and once again she got in and rowed away.

This time she headed for the Langmore mansion, and it was not long before she came within sight of the well-known dock where her own tiny craft still rested. She looked around. Not a soul seemed to be in sight.

With a cunningness far out of the ordinary, the poor girl crept along the shrubbery in the direction of the barn. This structure was locked up. From the barn she turned to the house, and, watching her chance, she entered by the cellarway, which chanced to be standing open.

It was dark and damp below stairs, and the girl shivered as she stood there, trying to make up her mind what to do next. Should she go right up and try to find her father? Supposing her stepmother was there, would she try to make more trouble?

Margaret mounted the stairs and entered the lower hall of the house. The blinds were closed, and all was dark. She moved towards the room where the body of her father had been found.

At that moment the woman who had been left at the mansion came from the kitchen. She caught one glimpse of the girl and set up a shriek.

"It's a ghost!" she cried. "A ghost! Heaven help me!"

The cry was so piercing and so genuine, it roused Margaret from the stupor in which she was moving.

"My father! He is dead, after all! Oh, daddy!" she screamed, and then turned, brushed past the woman, and sped out of the back door of the mansion.

"What's the matter?" came from the policeman who was on guard.

"She—a ghost!" stammered Mrs. Morse. "I saw her!"

"Her? Who?"

"Margaret Langmore! Or else her ghost!" The woman had gone white, and was shaking from head to feet.

"Where?"

"Here."

"When?"

"Just now!"

"It can't have been the girl. She is in bed, under the doctor's care."

"But I saw her!" insisted the woman.

"We'll take a look around," answered the guardian of the law.

They commenced the search, but long before this was done Margaret had run back to the river.

She dropped into the rowboat, and rowed off as swiftly as her failing strength would permit.

"Daddy is dead, after all!" she moaned, over and over again. "And she is dead, too! I remember it all, now. And the blood! Oh, I must get away, or they will hang me, or electrocute me!"

Five minutes more and the rowboat came to grief on some rocks close to the side of the stream. It commenced to fill with water, and Margaret had to wade ashore, which she did, slowly and deliberately, like one in a dream. Then she passed into the woods. Coming to a thick clump of bushes, she sank down exhausted, and there merciful sleep overtook her.

How long she slept, she did not know. The low growl of a dog aroused her. She sat up, and the growl of the dog became a heavy bark. Looking from out of the clump of bushes, she saw a mastiff standing there, eying her suspiciously.

"What is it, boy?" she heard a heavy voice ask. "A woodchuck? Never mind now, come on."

But the mastiff continued to bark, and came close enough to sniff at Margaret's foot. She essayed to draw back, but was too weak to do so.

"Won't come, eh?" cried the man. "What's the bloomin' reason, I'd like to know?"

He came closer and then caught sight of Margaret. For a second he stared in amazement; then uttered an exclamation.

"You! How did you get here?"

"Oh!" she fairly screamed. She recognized Matlock Styles, and knew not what to say. For some reason she felt as does the bird in the net of the fowler.

"This is bloomin' strange," went on the Englishman. "I thought you were down in the village, under the care of the doctors."

"I was," she managed to falter.

"How did you get here—run away?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I—I do not know. I—they have found me out! They are going to hang me, or electrocute me! I—I couldn't stand it!"

"How do you know that?"

"Oh, I know only too well."

"So you ran away, did you? 'Twas a bloody cute thing to do, Margaret. Say, you're dress is wet," he went on wonderingly.

"Yes, I was in a rowboat and had to wade ashore." She looked at him with a face full of wild misery. "Oh, please go away and leave me!"

"Leave you?"

"Yes! yes!"

"I can't do that, Margaret."

"You must!"

"But you are not fit to be left alone. You're sick."

"Never mind—only leave me!"

"Better let me take care of you." And now, having stopped the barking of the mastiff, he came and sat down by her side.

"No! no!" She tried to shrink away, but was too weak to succeed.

"So you ran away, eh? Are they after you?"

"I don't know. I—I suppose so."

"How did you get out of the house?"

"I climbed out of a window, when the nurse and the policeman were not looking."

"Bloomin' clever, that," he murmured. His eyes were watching her closely, and to himself he was saying: "Gad, what a beauty she is, in spite of what she has suffered!"

"I am going away—far away!" she went on, in a low voice. "Oh, I cannot, cannot stay here."

"You can't travel in your condition, Margaret." He pulled thoughtfully at his mutton-chop whiskers. "You let me help you."

"You?"

"Yes. Come, give me your arm," and he caught hold of her, as if to assist her to arise.

"No, no! Please leave me!" she begged. "I can take care of myself. Only give me the chance to get away!"

"Margaret! You are out of your mind."

"No, I am not."

"I know better. And I am not going to let you go away. You shall go with me."

"Oh, Mr. Styles! Please go away."

"No," he answered firmly. "Come, you have got to go with me."

CHAPTER XXIX

A GLASS OF POISON

MARGARET could do nothing but stare at the man before her. He was heavy-set and powerful, and wont to having his own way.

"Mr. Styles——" she began, but he put his hand over her mouth.

"You are sick—out of your head," he interrupted. "I know what is best, and you must do as I say. Come on." And he pulled her forward by the hand.

"Where to?"

"Not very far."

"I—I do not wish to go to your home."

"I'll not take you there, don't fear."

"You are going to hand me over to the—the authorities."

"Never! Come. I won't hurt you."

He led the way through the woods, across a small stream and past a spot where some wild berries grew. Then they struck a trail leading up a hillside. The place was new to her.

"I want to know where you are taking me," she said presently, and came to a halt.

"To a place where you will be safe."

"That isn't answering the question."

"We'll be there in a few minutes, and then you can see for yourself, Margaret. Cannot you trust me, girl? I'm not going to hurt you. I love you, and I'll do all I can to help you. Come!" And again he made her move on.

At last they came in sight of a tumbled-down cottage on the edge of what had once been a clearing, but which was now overgrown with weeds and brushwood. As they came up, Margaret's strength gave out, and suddenly she sank down on her knees.

"All in, are you?" he said, not unkindly, and, stooping, he picked her up bodily. She tried to resist, but could not, and he took her into the cottage and placed her on a couch.

"I'll get you a nurse," he said, noting her extreme paleness. "You need one."

"A—a woman?"

"Yes."

"Thank you," she murmured, and then closed her eyes, for she was too far gone to say more, or to make a move.

He was as good as his word, and when she roused up once more an old woman was at Margaret's side. She had administered some sort of drug—what, the girl did not know—and it had put her into a sound sleep.

When Margaret looked around again, she was surprised to see that it was morning. She tried to think, but her mind was almost a blank. Outside of the broken window a wild bird was singing gayly. She looked around. The old woman was not in sight.

She had been put to bed, and sat there, trying to think for several minutes. Then she gave a low call, and the old woman appeared in the doorway.

"Come awake, have ye, miss?" said she.

"Where am I?" asked Margaret feebly.

"You're safe enough, never fear."

Margaret said no more and the woman went about some little work. Presently the girl arose and dressed herself. She felt much stronger than when at the home of Martha Sampson, in spite of what she had experienced in running away. She sank down in a rocking chair, to think matters over.

How far was she from Sidham? She knew she must have come a long distance, but could not tell if it was five miles or fifty. She looked out of the window, but the scenery was strange to her.

As she sat there she reviewed what had passed, her mind becoming clearer as she thought. She remembered the scene at the inquest, and remembered how she had fainted, and how Raymond had supported her and taken her to the nurse's house. Then she remembered how the coroner's jury had accused her of the terrible crime, and she gave a deep shudder.

"Poor, dear father," she murmured. "Who could have been so wicked as to take your life?"

An hour went by, and she prepared to leave the cottage, when a shadow fell across the window, and Matlock Styles appeared. He spoke a few low words to the old woman, and the latter walked away.

As the man entered the room, Margaret arose and faced him. The Englishman was well dressed, and newly shaven, and wore a rosebud in his buttonhole. Evidently, he had spent some time over his toilet in honor of the occasion.

"I'm glad to see you up and looking so well," he said pleasantly. "I was afraid your running away would hurt you."

"I—I must thank you for what you have done for me, Mr. Styles," she answered.

"Oh, that's all right, Miss Margaret. I'd do as much for you any day. I think it's a bloomin' shame the way you have been treated."

"Well, I suppose it cannot be helped. But

I must be getting back soon. You will show me the road?"

"Don't be in a hurry to go. You're not strong enough to go. Besides——" the Englishman paused impressively. "What's the use of going back? Don't you know things look beastly black for you?"

"Perhaps, but I am not afraid—now. I am not guilty, Mr. Styles."

"Of course not! Of course not! I knew that from the start. But things do look black, no use of talking. I want to help you." He came closer, at which she retreated a step.

"Thank you, but I do not see what you can do. I must go back and give myself up. I—I was not myself when I ran away. It was a very foolish thing to do."

"If you go back, do you know what they will do? They will surely hang you?"

"Oh, merciful Heaven? Do not say that!"

"I wouldn't if it wasn't so. But I've been talking to the coroner and the chief of police, and they have all of the evidence as straight as a string."

"I am innocent."

"I feel that you are, and that is why I side with you. Besides, you know my feeling for you. I've loved you for a long time—I told you so before." He took hold of her arm. "If you'll do what I wish, I'll see to it that you escape—that you are never bothered any more."

"How can you do that?"

"Never mind how it can be done. Promise to give up Case, and be my wife, and I will attend to all of the rest. And I'll promise you more than that. Listen, do you know that I am immensely wealthy? It is so, and I can easily prove it. Look here." He drew a big roll of bank bills from his pocket, each bill of a large denomination. "I have ten thousand dollars here. It shall be yours for the taking—if you will marry me. I can easily raise five times this amount in forty-eight hours. We can go to Europe, or Australia, or anywhere we wish. Isn't that far better than to stay here, to be hung by a lot of country bumpkins, who don't understand the matter at all?"

She put up her hands, and waved him away. Then she burst into tears.

"Don't speak so, please don't! I—I cannot bear it, I have gone through so much already!"

"Won't you listen to reason?" Matlock Styles' face darkened. "I am giving you everything I have, my wealth, my honor, everything! Can a man do more than that? I love you—love you more than Raymond Case ever did, or will."

She wrung her hands and his dark eyes seemed to pierce her very soul. She felt faint and sank on a bench.

"Come, will you accept, Margaret?"

"No, no, I cannot!"

"But think of what is before you."

"If I tried to escape, they would soon be on my track——"

"No, I can prevent that."

"How?"

"Because the world will know that you are innocent."

She gave a start and looked at him wildly, pleadingly.

"Then you know the real murderer?" she panted.

"If I answer that question, will you become my wife?"

Again she shrank back.

"You know the murderer," she repeated. "Perhaps you committed the foul deeds yourself."

He took a step back as if struck a blow. Then he recovered quickly and smiled a bitter smile.

"No, I was not near the place, I can prove it. Besides, your folks and myself were on good terms. There is somebody else, who was around the house when the affair happened—somebody you know well, a person who would know all about the drug with which your father and Mrs. Langmore were killed."

"Who was it?"

"Will you consent to marry me?"

"Tell me first."

"No, afterwards."

"You are fooling me."

"I swear I am not, Margaret. Marry me, and I will clear you as surely as the sun is shining."

"And if I refuse?"

He came and caught her by the arm, his face blazing with sudden passion.

"Do not dare to do that! Don't you understand the matter? You are in my power—in my power absolutely. I can hand you over to the police whenever I will."

"That will not be such a hardship. I said I was going back."

"Bah! If I tell them that I caught you, that you begged me to let you get away—that you even said you would marry me, if I would aid you, what then? Everybody will think you guilty, and Raymond Case will never come near you again."

"You—you monster!"

"Perhaps I am a monster when aroused. You had better think this matter over."

"I do not want to think it over. My mind is made up. I shall never marry you, never, no matter what happens. I loathe and despise you!"

There was a moment of silence, and his dark face turned a sickly white and then red. He breathed heavily through his set teeth.

"You mean that?" he said finally, his eyes shining like those of a serpent.

"I do."

He glared at her steadily. Then, in a burst of rage, he caught her by the throat and threw her backward to the floor. She offered no resistance, and pausing in his madness he realized that she had swooned away.

"Fainted!" he hissed between his set teeth. "I wish she was dead! Curse her and her beauty!"

He waited, and as she did not return to consciousness, he picked her up, and placed her on the bed. Then he hurried outside:

"Go back to the house," he said to the old woman. "You'll not be needed here any more. And see that you keep your jaw closed over this," he added harshly. And the woman slunk away as if struck, like a dog.

Once inside of the cottage, he took up a glass of water standing on the table, and to this added a powder taken from his pocket, stirring it up well. Then he looked around to see that there was no other water around the building.

"When she rouses up she will be dry, and she will drink this," he muttered to himself. "Half a glass will do the work and she will never bother me or anybody else any more."

He paused again and took from his pocket several sheets of paper, closely and carelessly written upon in pencil. The first sheet was headed:

Dying Confession of Margaret Langmore.

"A fine forgery, if I do say so myself," he mused. "Mat, you always were a plum with the pen. I'll add a line telling where she can be found and then send it to the coroner. That will be better than leaving it around here. She might find it before she drank that dose." He paused again. "Perhaps she won't drink it after all. I'll give her some of it now, and make sure."

He raised up the almost lifeless girl, and forced open her lips. Then he took the glass, and poured half the contents down her throat. She spluttered, but swallowed, and he let her form drop back on the bed. He was in a cold perspiration now, and in sudden fear, he fairly rushed out of the cottage and down the hillside in the direction of his home.

CHAPTER XXX

RAISING THE CURTAIN

As soon as his interview with Tom Ostrello was at an end, Adam Adams asked the young man to leave him.

"I am going to follow up this clew," he said. "And the quicker the better."

He looked over a valise he carried and selected a number of things he wanted. Midnight found him at the depot, boarding a train for Fairfield. At the latter place he changed and took another train for Bryport. Arriving at that city, he located at a hotel, and went to bed.

He was up at sunrise and procured an early breakfast. Then he returned to his room and spent a full hour in donning another outfit and in powdering his face, and adjusting a wig and a reddish moustache.

The same car that had taken him to the vicinity of John Watkins' residence before, took him there again. As he approached the house he saw the secret service man coming forth.

"Excuse me, Mr. Watkins, but I must see you," said he, in a low and suggestive tone.

"To see me?" questioned the man. "What about?"

"Well, I must see you alone. *The sky may be rather red,* you know."

At the last words the secret service man started slightly. "That's true, and *I don't like a red sky,"* he answered. "Come into the house. You just caught me in time."

He led the way inside and up to his den, closing and locking the door after him.

"Now, then, what do you want to see me about?" he demanded sharply.

"Don't you recognize me?"

"I must say I do not, although your face seems familiar."

"I am Number Four."

There was a pause, and Adam Adams studied the face before him closely.

"Well?" came from the secret service man coldly.

"There has been trouble, Mr. Watkins. Matlock Styles sent me to you."

"The dickens you say. What right has he——"

"He had to do it. Things are getting warm."

"He should have come himself."

"He couldn't do it. The detectives are shadowing every movement he makes. He didn't even dare to drop you a letter."

"What's the cause of the trouble?"

"Those queers in the safe."

"Then the authorities got them?"

"Yes, and they've sent down some New York detectives, who are watching everybody."

"Bah! Styles must be getting nervous."

"He told me to tell you something more. They found something else. It's about the poison powder that was used. You made some kind of a mistake——"

John Watkins leaped to his feet and turned pale.

"I made a mistake?" he cried. "How? For Heaven's sake, man, tell me all!" He went to a cupboard, got out some brandy and drank a stiff portion.

"That is what Styles wants to find out. He thinks you put out some clews that point to him. He says if you did he will blow you sky-high. He wants the truth from you, and he wants it right away."

"Clews? Against him? He is crazy. I never put out a single clew against him. Why should I? Wasn't it arranged that we should fix it against the girl, and didn't I even go to the trouble to spy on Langmore and get the combination of the safe—although it didn't do any good. And then after the job was done, didn't I——" The secret service man came to an abrupt stop, as if fearing he had said too much. "Look here, did he tell you all this, or is this some game?"

"Hey!" exclaimed Adam Adams, pretending to be amazed. "Did he tell me. See here, I don't care if you are the boss, I am not going to run the risk of being sent up for twenty years for you. I came to help Styles out, that's all. I had the devil's own job getting out of Sidham without being followed. To-morrow I am going to take my money and move West. You won't trust a fellow, and yet you expect——"

"Never mind, Pink, don't get on your ear so quick——"

"Ain't I got a right to get on my ear? You go and poison two people and then——"

"Who said I did the poisoning?" John Watkins was plainly agitated.

"Didn't Styles tell all of us? He wasn't going to have those clews pointing to him. He says you bungled."

"He is a calf!" roared John Watkins. "Where is the nerve he used to have? So he told all of you that I did the job, eh? Well, I'll square things with him for that."

"He wouldn't care if you hadn't made some sort of a botch——"

"I? A botch? Say, don't you believe what he tells you, because it isn't true!"

"Well, he says——"

"I don't care what he says. I didn't do the job, and I am not going to let him shift the responsibility on my shoulders. He's a fool. Don't everybody think the girl is guilty, and if they clear her isn't there another string to the bow?"

"You mean Tom Ostrello?"

"That's it. So he told you about that, too," came from the secret service man bitterly. "Well, he isn't the man I thought he was. I suppose he has gone and blabbed right and left."

"Only to the band. We knew something was on the carpet and we cornered him and then he had to speak. Why, one of the New York detectives found our place under the old mill, and we had to do him to keep the thing a secret."

"You got him out of the way?"

"Yes."

"Did Styles do that job?"

"No. We had to draw lots. I ain't saying who drew the red ball."

"Maybe you drew it yourself."

"Maybe I did and maybe I didn't. What I want to know is: What are we to do? The crowd don't like Styles much, and I can tell you confidentially, that for two pins we would throw him over—that is, if you will stand by us."

"You want to elect a new leader?"

"Yes. But with the understanding that the crowd is to be let in on the ground floor after this. No more working in the dark. Even yet we don't know why those murders were committed, and yet it looks as if all of us might suffer, unless you pull us through O. K."

"Didn't Styles tell you why?"

"No, although he hinted at something."

"Well, I'll tell you, Pink, and you can tell the rest. Barry Langmore had some dealings with Styles about patents and mortgages. One day Styles drank a little too much, and went to Langmore to pay a bill. He had two packages of money with him, each for several thousand dollars. One package was good money and the other was our own brand. Styles also had some loose bills with him. He paid part of a mortgage and also something on an invention. When he went away, he saw that he had made a mistake and given Langmore the counterfeit bills. He went back the next day, but Langmore had gone away, on a short vacation. When he came back Styles went to him and they had a pretty stormy scene. Langmore had tried to pass a bill, and learned it was a counterfeit. Styles pretended that he didn't know the money was bad, but Langmore wouldn't believe him. Some of the money had gone to Mrs. Langmore, too. Styles begged to get the money back and offered Langmore his rights in an invention if only Langmore would keep quiet. Langmore said he would think it over, but I am inclined to think he communicated with the police instead, although I have no proof. Anyway, we made up our minds that Langmore knew too much, and so did his wife. Then—well, they were found dead, that's all."

"And you say you didn't commit the deed?"

"I did not."

"Then Styles must have done the job, since there was no one else."

"Didn't he tell you that he can prove an *alibi*! That he was over to Stony Hill at the time the deed was done?"

"Yes, but if that is true, then you are guilty. You got that poison from Henry Bloom, and he told Tom Ostrello that he let you have it. There is where you blundered. Ostrello and others are on your track. You can't escape unless you can prove an *alibi*, too."

Again John Watkins shrank back as if struck a blow.

"Who—who told this—who says——" he began hoarsely.

"Matlock Styles."

"Then he can go to perdition! I'll not stand up for him a minute longer. Yes, I got the poison, but I gave it to him. I can prove it by the old woman who works for him, if I have to wring her neck to make her speak. She heard me tell him how to use it. He trusts her, because he has her where the hair is short. She killed a child years ago, when she ran a baby farm. And then about that *alibi*——" The secret service man laughed bitterly. "So that's his game, if it comes to a showing of hands? Well, I can put a spoke in his wheel. He was at Stony Hill, was he? Well, so was I. I can prove that, too."

There was a pause, during which the secret service man took another drink of liquor. He was plainly very nervous. With great deliberation, Adam Adams drew from one pocket a pistol, and from another a pair of handcuffs.

"The scene is ended, Mr. Watkins," he said coolly. "I want you to slip on those and come with me." And he threw the handcuffs on the table, and leveled the pistol at the fellow's head.

The man staggered and threw up his hands, half expecting a shot. He suddenly began to tremble, as if with the ague.

"What do you mean? Wh—who are you?" he faltered.

"I am Adam Adams. I believe we have met before."

"Adams!" The secret service man sank back in an armchair. "And you—you are here to arrest me?"

"Exactly. As I said before, the whole game is up. Inside of half an hour you will be safe in prison, and then we shall round up such other members of the gang as are still at large. Unless you want to make a confession, you will have to stand trial for the murder of Mr. and Mrs. Langmore."

"Never! I'll—I'll tell all I know first!" The man's lips were white and his eyes full of commingled rage and fear.

"You will make a clean and clear statement?"

"Yes."

"Clearing up the murder mystery?"

"Yes."

CHAPTER XXXI

LIGHT AT LAST—CONCLUSION

As soon as Adam Adams returned to Sidham he communicated with the chief of police, and with several other persons, and also sent two telegrams to New York. He tried to find Charles Vapp, but could not locate his assistant.

The detective's plans were laid with care and he gave the posse of men under him minute instructions as to what to do. In the midst of the work Raymond and Tom Ostrello appeared.

"Let me go along," said Raymond. "I want to do my little towards rounding that gang up."

"And so do I," came from the young commercial traveler.

"You may go as far as Styles' farm, if you wish," said Adam Adams. "But why not look for Miss Langmore instead?"

At this Raymond's face grew troubled.

"We have looked everywhere——" he began.

"As you please."

It was not long after this that a portion of the party set out, to be followed presently by the rest. The men did not keep together, but scattered in a wide semicircle, and then in a circle, which completely surrounded the Styles' farm, and the old mill, and its vicinity.

As they approached the farm they saw the man called Bart come out, and walk towards the barn. He was promptly arrested by Adam Adams and was asked where Matlock Styles could be found.

"I don't know," he answered sullenly. "I don't know why you are arresting me. I haven't done anything wrong."

"We'll see about that later," returned the detective, and when the man wanted to blow a whistle he carried, promptly prevented it, and took the whistle away. Then the man was compelled to quiet the dogs, which he did with bad grace.

In the kitchen of the house they found the old woman, who gave a cry of alarm when told that she must give herself up to the law.

"Sure, I didn't have anything to do with it!" she wailed. "I—I didn't touch the young lady!"

"What's that?" cried Raymond, stepping forward.

"I didn't touch the young lady, sir. I offered her something to eat, that's all."

"Can she mean Margaret?" whispered Tom Ostrello.

"Where did you meet Miss Langmore?" demanded Raymond sharply.

"Up at the old cottage on the hill. I—I didn't take her there. It was——" She stopped short. "I can't tell you. Mat would kill me," she whined.

"See here, tell all you know," came sternly from Adam Adams. "I know you. You once ran a baby farm, and a baby died, and I know how."

The old woman gave a shriek and fell on her knees, rocking to and fro.

"I knew it! I knew it would come! It can't be hid any longer! Yes, I did it!"

"Where is Miss Langmore?" demanded Raymond impatiently.

"At the cottage on the hill. Mat took her there. He's in love with her. Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" she began to rock to and fro again. "I knew it would come! Murder will out, they say!"

"Take us to that cottage and be quick about it," said Raymond. "Will you go along?" he asked of Adam Adams and Tom Ostrello.

They said they would, and set off without delay. It was rather a long walk and the old woman was out of breath when they reached the building near the top of the hill.

"Watch her," said the detective to Tom Ostrello, and he and Raymond entered the cottage. As they did so, they stumbled over a person lying on the floor.

"Margaret!" burst out the young man and caught his sweetheart in his arms. Then he gave a gasp, and staggered with his burden to the bed. "She is dead!"

"Dead!" ejaculated Adam Adams. "You are certain?" He placed his ear to her heart. "No, she still lives."

"But what does this mean? Margaret! Margaret! Speak to me! What has happened to you?"

The girl offered no reply, nor did she open her eyes. She rested on him and on the bed like a leaden weight. He kissed her fondly, a great agony filling his soul.

Adam Adams looked around the room. On the table rested a glass, with a dirty substance at the bottom. He tasted the stuff. It was sweetishly bitter. He ran outside.

"Tell me at once, did Matlock Styles say anything about poisoning this young lady?" he demanded, catching the old woman by the arm. "The truth now, remember!"

"No, he didn't say anything. But he had some poison, a powder—you put it in water. It kills a person in six to ten hours, sure."

"We must have a doctor!"

Tom Ostrello had heard the talk and saw what had happened.

"I'll get a doctor, if you'll watch the old woman. I can get a horse at Styles' farm."

"Do it, and hurry!" cried Raymond. "Take the best horse and bring the doctor at once. Tell him it is poison—a powder in water. Offer him any amount of money——"

"I will!" Ostrello shouted back. He was running down the hill path with the swiftness of a college sprinter. In a moment the bushes hid him from sight.

Adam Adams was talking to the old woman. "You know about the poison. Is there nothing we can give her to counteract the effects? Do something, and I'll not be so hard on you when you stand up for trial."

"I can do nothing. But wait, yes, I can! Make a fire, and boil some water!"

She ran to the back of the cottage and to some bushes growing close at hand. With her bare hands she dug at the roots and tore them up, stripping off the bark with her teeth. Adam

Adams comprehended, and lit a fire and set on the kettle to boil. Then the roots were placed in the boiling water.

"Make her drink—it will do her good," said the old woman. "I swear it will help, at least a little—until the doctor comes." And with shaking hands, she poured the concoction she had made into a saucer to cool.

It was no easy matter to get Margaret to swallow, but after a while it was accomplished, and her heart appeared to beat a trifle more steadily. But still she did not rouse up or open her eyes, and Raymond was as depressed as before.

"We can't overcome the effects of the drug," he groaned. "Oh, if only the doctor would come!"

"Give her some more," said the old woman. "Give her all of it," and this was done.

Slowly the time dragged by, until they heard a shouting in the distance, followed by a pistol shot. Then two horses burst into view, one ridden by Ostrello, and the other by a doctor who lived not a great distance away.

"I will do all I can," said the physician, as he leaped to the ground. He set to work at once, meanwhile questioning the old woman regarding what had already been done. "That was all right—it has helped to put the patient into a perspiration and keep up the heart action."

"Another doctor is also coming," said Ostrello to Raymond and the detective.

"In that case I'll join my men," came from Adam Adams. "By that pistol shot something must be doing. I will be back later. See that that old woman does not get away." And he was off.

Something was indeed doing. The old mill had been surrounded and the chief of police had entered the building, followed by several other men of the party. The counterfeiters were taken by surprise, but they did not give up at once. Some began to fight, and in the mêlée two were seriously wounded. Then all but three surrendered, these three doing what they could to get out by a back way. One of the three was Matlock Styles.

The three men came out in the woods, and one was quickly shot in the leg, and fell headlong among the trees. Seeing this the second man shouted that he would surrender, and threw up his arms as a signal.

"You bloomin' fool! I'll not surrender!" cried Matlock Styles, and ran on, through the woods, and up the hill that led to the cottage.

He was still some distance off, when Adam

Adams saw him coming. The detective had his pistol in his hand.

"Stop, Styles, or I'll fire on you!" he called out.

For an answer the Englishman raised his own pistol and fired point blank, the bullet cutting through the loose flap of Adam Adams' coat. Then the Englishman went down, with a bullet in his left side. When Adam Adams ran up to him he was twisting and breathing heavily.

"You've done me up, hang you!" he gasped. "Oh, if I only could get at you!" and he tried to crawl towards his pistol, but Adam Adams promptly kicked it out of the way.

"You're down and out, Styles," said the detective. "It won't do you any good to squirm. You're in the hands of the law."

"What for, counterfeiting?"

"That and worse."

"Worse?"

"Yes, a good deal worse. Murder!"

By nightfall all of the prisoners were either in the jail or at the hospital at Sidham. Some of the secret service authorities from New York had arrived, and to them Adam Adams turned over the case, so far as it related to the counterfeiters.

"I did not start out to round up such a gang," he said, in speaking of the affair to Mr. Breslow, some days later. "I came here to clear up the murder mystery."

"But you get the credit, Adams," said the head of the secret service detail. "And you deserve it. But do you think you are going to convict Matlock Styles of the tragedy?"

"It's a sure thing. The *alibi* won't bother me, for I can now prove it was a bogus one. John Watkins got the poison for him, and promised to impersonate him at Stony Hill, while the crime was being committed. He did it, but I have found two people who thought it was not Styles after all. Watkins himself is willing to testify that he did the impersonating."

"How did they happen to use that strange powder?"

"Watkins got it from a friend of his, who afterwards mentioned the fact to Tom Ostrello. When Styles got it I suppose he thought the use of it might throw suspicion on Ostrello, which it did. Then suspicion was also thrown on Miss Langmore, so that the general public might get tangled up."

"Did Styles write that note, which was supposed to have been written by Mr. Langmore, saying she must obey or leave the house?"

"Yes. He is an expert penman, and most likely a regular forger as well as counterfeiter. He only made a mistake when he drank too much."

"Did Watkins know any of the details of the murder?"

"Yes. After it was over, Styles came to him and told his story, being half drunk at the time. He said he left home and came through the woods, where he saw Tom Ostrello just coming from the Langmore mansion. As soon as the coast seemed clear, he ran past the bushes and got in the house by a window. He found Mr. Langmore in the library and asked again for the counterfeits. Langmore said he was going to give them to the authorities, and expose Styles. Then the Englishman said he would explain, and Langmore sat down in his chair to listen. Styles turned around, took some cotton from his pocket, and saturated it with the powder, and sprang at Langmore from behind. The victim struggled and got his face scratched from the Englishman's ring. Langmore was no match for his assailant, and in a minute the murder was done. Then Styles ran upstairs. He knew the servant was in the barn, and he heard Miss Langmore playing on the piano in the parlor. He met Mrs. Langmore just coming from her room. She was scared, but before she could scream or resist, he gave her what was left of the powder and she fell over where she was found. Then he stepped out of an upper window to the top of the piazza and dropped to the ground, and came away across the brook and through the woods."

"Then you are bound to convict him. What of Watkins?"

"I'll use him as a witness against Styles in the murder trial and then you can have him tried as a counterfeiter. The old woman will also prove a good witness. She is so old, and has promised to reform, so there is no use of our pushing a charge against her. The rest of the crowd will all get what they deserve. I'm glad we got the bogus printing plates."

"Have you heard anything of the Langmore estate?"

"Yes. Mr. Langmore left his wife her legal share, and the balance to his daughters, Margaret getting a little the larger portion. Mrs. Langmore leaves her money to her sons, one-fourth to Dick, the spendthrift, and three-fourths to Tom. I have also rooted out some papers among Styles' effects, which will give Tom Ostrello his patent back, and also give some patent rights to Mr. Langmore's estate. I can tell you, Matlock Styles was a deep one. It was only once in a great while that he drank and bungled."

"Well, the greatest of criminals have their weak spots, you know that as well as I do. Styles, I suppose, also got up that bogus confession, signed in Miss Langmore's name."

"He did. When he found the girl wouldn't marry him, he was wild and ready for any treachery."

"And how is the girl doing?"

"I am going to see now."

When out on the street, Adam Adams ran into Tom Ostrello, arm in arm with Letty. He was amazed for an instant, and then his face broke into a smile.

"I just couldn't help it, Uncle Adam!" cried the girl. "I had to come here to congratulate Tom on his escape."

"Well, I don't blame you, Letty. Yes, it has turned out well for you. I hope it turns out as well for Miss Langmore and Mr. Case."

Margaret was again at Martha Sampson's cottage. When the detective entered he heard a murmur of voices in one of the upper rooms. He ran upstairs, to find the girl sitting up in bed and Raymond by her side. The young man's face was filled with happiness.

"Come in! Come in!" he cried joyously. "She has come around all right, Mr. Adams. She is a little weak still, but the doctor says she will be well as ever in a week or ten days. The good news has braced her up wonderfully."

"And all due to you, Mr. Adams," said the girl. "Oh, how can I ever thank you enough?" She clasped his hand warmly. "You are so good!"

"This is certainly famous," he replied, sitting down at the foot of the bed. "It's the best news yet. I have just left one happy couple and here I find another."

"You mean Tom Ostrello and that young lady from your office?" asked Raymond. And then, as the detective nodded, he went on: "I met them, and I asked them to come here. Margaret wanted to see them."

"I wish Tom to know that I want to be friends, always," said Margaret. "We have had enough of trouble in the family. And when he gets married, I want to be friends with his wife, too."

"I am glad to hear that, for I know it will please Letty and she is a good girl. It may be—— Here they come, now!"

A minute later the newcomers were ushered into the sick room, and the two girls, who had never met, were introduced to each other. It was a happy meeting all around, and the lovers were all as devoted as lovers can well be. Seeing this, Adam Adams thought it about time to leave.

"I am going now," he said, and stopped at the door.

"So soon?" asked Margaret.

"Yes, I have another important case on hand," answered Adam Adams.

"Another case?" queried Tom Ostrello. "Well, I wish you luck, I am sure."

"We all do," chimed in Raymond.

"What is it?" queried Letty.

Adam Adams smiled broadly. "As you are no longer connected with the office, I cannot tell you," he said.

"Maybe I can guess it!" cried Raymond. "The disappearance of John Darr—the case all New York is talking about?"

Adam Adams smiled faintly. "You've struck it," he said. "It is a wonderful case, and will demand all of my attention. But I'll be back to-morrow. In the meantime, I want you all to remember that you owe me an invitation."

"An invitation to what?" asked both girls, in a breath, and knowing perfectly well what he meant.

"An invitation to the weddings, when they come off."

"Oh!" came in a little feminine shriek.

"Well, you get them," said Raymond.

"Indeed, he does," said Tom.

And he did.

THE END.

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